ON THE YUKON TRAIL

James Craig

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Sincerely
Roy J. Snell
(pen name James Cr

The Radio-Phone Boys Stories

On the Yukon Trail

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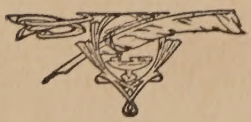
On the Yukon Trail

By

JAMES CRAIG



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On the Yukon Trail

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On the Yukon Trail

CHAPTER I

THE WHISPER FROM AFAR

Curlie Carson sat before an alcohol stove. Above and on all sides of him were the white walls of a tent. The constant bulging and sagging of these walls, the creak and snap of ropes, told that outside a gale was blowing. Beneath Curlie was a roll of deerskin and beneath that was ice; a glacier, the Valdez Glacier. They were a half day's journey from the city of Valdez. Straight up the frowning blue-black wall of ice they had made their way until darkness had closed in upon them and a steep cliff of ice had appeared before them.

In a corner of the tent, sprawled upon a deerskin sleeping-bag, lay Joe Marion, Curlie's pal in other adventures.

"Lucky we've got these sleeping-bags," Joe drawled. "Even then I don't see how a fellow's going to keep warm, sleeping right out here on the ice with the wind singing around under the tent." He shivered as he drew his mackinaw more closely about him.

Curlie said nothing. If you have read the other book telling of Curlie's adventures, "Curlie Carson Listens In," you scarcely need be told that Curlie Carson is a boy employed by the United States Bureau of Secret Service of the Air, a boy who has the most perfect pair of radio ears of any person known to the service.

In that other adventure which had taken him on a wild chase over the ocean in a pleasure yacht, he had had many narrow escapes, but this new bit of service which had been entrusted to him promised to be even more exciting and hazardous.

He had been sent in search of a man who apparently was bent on destroying the usefulness of the radiophone in Alaska; his particular desire seeming to be to imperil the life of

Munson, a great Arctic explorer, by interrupting his radiophone messages. This man was known to be possessed of abundant resources, to be powerful and dangerous. He had a perfect knowledge of all matters pertaining to the radiophone and was possessed of a splendidly equipped sending and receiving set. By moving this set about from place to place, he had succeeded in eluding every government operator sent out to silence him. Already he had done incalculable damage by breaking in upon government messages and upon private ones as well.

Just at this moment, Curlie sat cross-legged upon his sleeping-bag. With head and shoulders drooping far forward, as if weighed down by the radiophone receiver which was clamped upon his ears, he appeared half asleep. Yet every now and again his slim, tapered fingers shot out to give the coil aerial which hung suspended from the ridge pole of the tent a slight turn.

"I don't see how we are going to get the

rest of the way over this glacier!" grumbled Joe. "That wall looks straight up; slick as glass, too. How y' ever goin' to get three sleds and eight hundred pounds of junk up there? Ought to have taken the lower trail. What if it is three times as far? Good trail anyway."

"Leave that to Jennings," murmured Curlie.

"Oh! Jennings!" exclaimed Joe. "Mebby he doesn't know so much. He's been gone too long already. What's that package he took with him? Gave us the slip already, maybe. Might be just a frame-up to keep us from making good time."

"Jennings looks all right to me," persisted Curlie.

He gave the aerial another turn.

"Well, anyway I"—

"Sh"— Curlie held up a warning finger. His nose was wiggling like a rabbit's when he eats clover. Joe knew what that meant; Curlie was getting something from the air.

Curlie started as the first word came to him

— a whisper. He had heard that whisper many times before. For many days it had been silent. Now she was speaking to him again, that mysterious phantom girl of the air.

As he eagerly pressed the receivers to his ears, he caught, faint as if coming from afar, yet very distinctly, the whispered words:

"Hello - Curlie - I - wonder - if - you - are - listening - in - to-night. You - are - on - your - way - north. I - wanted - to - tell - you - the - man - you - are - after - is - on - the - Yukon - Trail - coming - south. He - started - yesterday. You - may - meet - him - Curlie - but - be - careful. It - is - big - Curlie - and - awful - awful - dangerous."

Cold beads of perspiration stood out upon the tip of Curlie's nose as the whisper ceased.

He had measured the distance. The girl was a thousand miles away to the north. So that was it? The man he had been sent to track down by means of the radio-compass was coming south over the trail. They would meet. He wondered how and where. There were

wild, desolate stretches of tundra and forest on that trail. Inhabited only by Indians and wolves, these offered fitting background for a tragedy. Whose tragedy would it be?

"We might wait for him," he mused, "but, no, that wouldn't do. He might turn back. Then all that time would be lost. No, we must press on. We must get off this glacier at once."

In spite of his optimism, this glacier bothered him. He had taken this trail at the suggestion of Jennings, a man who had gone over the trail during the gold rush of '98 and who had offered to go with them now without pay. He had, as he expressed it, been called back by the "lure of the North," and must answer the call. Curlie had decided to accept his assistance and advice. Now he wrinkled his brow in thought. Had he made a mistake in the very beginning?

Just then, as if in answer to his question, Jennings, a short, broad-shouldered person with keen, deep-set blue eyes and drooping moustache, parted the tent-flaps and entered.

"What? Not turned in yet?" His eyes showed surprise.

"Had to see that you got back safe," smiled Curlie. He made a mental note of the fact that Jennings had not brought back the package he had carried away. Only a light axe swung at his belt.

"Well, that's kind and thoughtful," said Jennings. "But we'd better get into them sleepin'-bags pronto. Got a good stiff day to-morrow. Make good progress too or I'm no sourdough-musher.

Fifteen minutes later, Curlie having buried himself deep in the hairy depths of his sleeping-bag, had given himself over to a few moments of thought before the drowsy quiet of the tent lulled him to repose.

The sleeping-bags, in spite of Joe's forebodings, proved to be all that one might ask. With nothing but a square of canvas between his sleeping-bag and the ice, and with the temperature at thirty below, clad only in his pajamas Curlie felt quite as comfortable as he

might have felt in his own bed back home.

"Wonderful thing, these bags," he thought dreamily. His thought about the future, the day just before him, was not quite so reassuring. They had come to ridges of ice on the surface of the glacier just at nightfall. There were many of these ridges. Dogs without sleds could climb them, but up their slopes they could not pull a pound. A man climbed them with difficulty. His feet slipping at every attempted step, he was constantly in danger of being dashed to the bottom. How were they to pack eight hundred pounds of equipment and supplies over these seemingly unsurmountable barriers?

Yet he dreaded to think of turning back. That meant four days of travel to reach a point which, straight over the glacier, was but twenty miles before them.

"Ho, well," he sighed at last, "let to-morrow take care of itself. Perhaps Jennings really knows a way. He doesn't look like a four-flusher."

With that his mind turned for a moment to the girl, the Whisperer. Though he had never seen her, he had come to think of this Whisperer as a real person. And indeed she must be, for, times without number, in the Secret Tower Room back there in the city, in the wireless room on the yacht, in the tent on the trail, her whisper had come to him. Always it told of the doings of one man, the man he had been But what sort of person? He had pictured her to himself as a small, dark, vivacious girl with snapping black eyes. Yet that was only a piece of fancy. He knew nothing about her save the fact that she seemed always near the man he now was seeking. He wondered vaguely now whether he would meet her upon this trip. He tried to imagine the cabin, the lonely trail or the deep forest of the north where he might meet her.

"Probably never will," he told himself at last. "Probably will always be just a whisper."

In the midst of his revery he fell asleep.

CHAPTER II

ON ARCTIC FEATHERS

A tardy dawn had scarcely come creeping over the surface of the glacier when they broke camp. Having breakfasted heartily on sour-dough flapjacks, warmed-over baked beans and coffee, they were ready for anything.

"We'll sleep in a better bed to-night," remarked Jennings as he rolled up the canvas floor to their tent and threw it on his sled.

"Couldn't be warmer," said Curlie.

"No, but softer."

"Cheer-o," shouted Joe, "that sounds good to me."

"Now," said Jennings, producing from the depths of his pack two small double pulleys and a coil of rope, "the next thing is to get over the ridges. Have to use block and tackle."

"That sounds all right," smiled Curlie, "but

how you going to hitch a block to a smooth surface of ice?"

"Leave it to me," laughed the miner. "Between four and five thousand of us went over this glacier in '98. Had mighty few dogs and pulled 1400 pounds of outfit apiece too. That was tough sledding. Didn't make a thousand feet progress in a day sometimes. Three of our crowd never did get over; froze to death right here on the glacier. But I tell you," he exclaimed suddenly, "those were the days! Those were the men! It's always the bravest and the best that go first in a rush like that. The cheap, the idle, the crooked ones come later to live off the gains of those who dared much in the beginning." Having ended this little oration, he got down to business.

"You boys string the rope through those blocks. When you get that done, throw me up one of the blocks."

"Here," he exclaimed, "better strap these on your shoes. They'll help you a lot."

The things he threw at their feet were made

of steel and leather. When they were strapped upon the soles of one's shoes they transformed their plain, heavy felt-lined shoes into something resembling baseball shoes.

"Great stuff!" exclaimed Joe, driving the sharp steel barbs beneath the balls of his feet into the ice. "Couldn't slip in these if you tried to."

A moment later they tossed one of the blocks into which the rope had been threaded up to Jennings on the icy ridge above.

"All right," he sang out a moment later. "Hitch the other block to the sled and heave away."

Much to the surprise of the boys, when they pulled at the rope, the block, out of sight on the ridge above, held firm, and the sled climbed slowly up the almost perpendicular bank. A moment later, they saw Jennings drag the sled to a safe position on the icy bench.

"How does he do it?" whispered Joe.

"Got me," Curlie whispered back. "He surely couldn't hold it."

"Say not! Took both of us to pull it up and we had the advantage of the blocks."

"All right," came from above as a block glided back to them, "let's have the next one."

When the three sleds were upon the bench and the dogs had been induced to follow, the boys climbed up, eager to discover the miner's secret.

"Oh!" exclaimed Joe. "Only a stake in the ice. Who could have left it?"

He was staring at a stout stake which stuck ten inches above the surface of the ice.

"Nobody. I put it there," Jennings smiled. Then, seeing their look of incredulity, he went on, "You'll remember I left the cabin last night with a package under my arm. Also, you will remember that I melted a bucket of snow water while supper was cooking. In the bundle there was nothing but stout stakes; a dozen of them. You'll find them up the glacier, all frozen in. All I had to do was to chip a hole in the ice, then thrust in a stake. After that I filled the hole full of snow, then poured water over it.

The snow and water froze together almost instantly and here we have our stakes. We'll have lunch on the other side of the ridge and to-night we will sleep in a spruce forest. We shall then have gained a full two days on our journey. With the trail in its present condition we could not have made the journey over the roundabout valley in less than four days and even then we would have worn down our dogs."

When, a few hours later, all the miner's prophecies had been fulfilled and the boys were preparing the second night's camp, they were enthusiastic in their praise of their new-found friend.

"To-night," smiled the miner, "we will sleep on a bed of Arctic feathers."

"Arctic feathers!" exclaimed Curlie in surprise. "What are they?"

"Wait and see."

Jennings studied the shapely spruce trees which towered about them on every side. Then he allowed his eyes to wander over the surface

of the earth's two-foot-thick mantle of snow.

"That's a good place," he pointed at a smooth spot which was surrounded by trees. "First we'll tramp down the snow. No need of shoveling it away."

At once they set to work packing down a square of snow.

"Might as well start right," said the miner. "We're going into a land of long nights. Fairly long now but they'll get much longer. Get to be twenty hours. If we start making camp right we'll have all the comforts of home."

"There," he said at last, "guess that'll do. Now we'll divide up the work and make the jobs regular; each fellow do the same thing every night. System, that's what you need on the trail, as well as in business."

Turning to Joe he said: "There's a likely looking tree right there. Cut it down."

"It won't burn; it's green."

"Who said it would?"

Joe grinned as he seized an axe to drive it into the thick bark of the tree.

"There's a dead tree for you, Curlie," said the miner. "Get it down and cut it into wood for the Yukon stove."

Turning to the camp kit, he was soon at work straightening out the tent, which had collected dampness from the previous night and was frozen stiff in spots.

He spread it over their tent-site and set it up as best he could. Then, crawling inside, he set up the sheet-iron stove and started a fire. As the tent, warmed by the fire, began to soften, he gradually drew it into its accustomed shape.

In the meantime each boy had felled his tree and had trimmed it up.

"Now, Joe," said the veteran camper, "cut your tree into lengths to go across each side of our tent and chop the first six inches of each end half off as if you were building a log house."

When this had been accomplished, he assisted Joe in placing the poles in a square about the tent. He next drew the lower edges of the

tent out over the logs and packed snow over them to the depth of several inches. After that he spread a square of canvas as a floor to the tent.

"There," he sighed at last; "won't any air get into our tent to-night. Next thing is a lot of spruce boughs. Cut 'em right off and drag 'em inside."

When the tent was packed half full of boughs, he took out a large clasp knife and began to clip off the small twigs on the branches. The boys followed his example. In a few moments the shorn branches were all outside the tent and the canvas floor was buried ten inches deep with spruce needles and fine twigs.

"Now," said the miner, "the two of you hold up the stove while I spread a canvas over the whole of it and our camp is made."

"Just like an old-fashioned feather bed!" exclaimed Joe, as he bounced down upon the springy bed of twigs.

"That's it," smiled the miner. "Those are Arctic feathers. If we take time to make a

camp like this every night, we'll get a lot of comfort out of it and be all the better fitted for the trail. I'll go out and set up a shelter for the dogs while you boys get supper, then we'll be through for the night."

CHAPTER III

A CLUE

After a hearty supper, Curlie brought forth his instruments and carefully wound his coil aerial.

The miner watched him for a long time in silence. Having lived in out-of-the-way places, he had learned nothing of this wonderful new invention, the radiophone.

"You don't mean to tell me," he broke forth at last, "that you can hear folks talk with just that outfit, no wires at all, and them fifty miles away?"

"Yes," smiled Curlie, "five hundred miles or a thousand if you like. Almost any distance when conditions are right."

Dropping back upon his sleeping-bag the miner watched with increasing interest. It was evident that he found the thing hard to

believe and that at the same time he did not wish to doubt the word of a boy who had never told him a lie.

"Joe," said Curlie, "here's something brand new. I think it's going to help us a lot."

He placed a small instrument on top of a metal box, then connected it by a tube to a loud-speaker. After that he tuned in on the 750 meter wave length and spoke a few words into his transmitter. Having done this, he settled back as if to await an answer.

Presently a loud jumble of sound, resembling nothing quite so much as a flock of crows fighting over a carcass, began coming forth from the loud speaker.

Joe Marion's brow wrinkled. At the end of three seconds he exploded:

"Tune her up, why don't you!"

Curlie grinned, but did not move.

"No use letting it go on like that," expostulated Joe, making a move to take a hand in the business. "He might be sending something important."

"He is," said Curlie, pushing his companion back to his seat. "He's saying something mighty important. That's why I don't change it. I told you I had something new. Can't you wait to see it tried out?"

Sinking back into his place, Joe listened to the strange clack-clack in silence.

A few seconds later the sounds ceased. Quickly removing a small instrument and disconnecting the tube from the loud-speaker, Curlie tuned in on 350 and, a moment later, they were listening to a concert which was being broadcasted somewhere on the Pacific Coast.

"Do you mean to tell me that that thing is a phonograph?" said Jennings.

"No," said Curlie, "I don't. That music comes to us over five hundred miles of space, perhaps a thousand; Seattle, Vancouver, San Francisco, I don't know which."

Again the miner was silent.

Removing a small disc from the instrument which had produced the strange jumble of

sounds, Curlie slipped it upon a second instrument which resembled a small phonograph.

"Now listen to this," he said to Joe, as he shut off the radiophone.

From the phonograph-like instrument there came first a grating sound, then in a somewhat metallic but very distinct tone:

"Valdez speaking. Your man is still active. Doing much damage in air. Last night interrupted an important U. S. army order. Seemed nearer. Appears to be moving toward us. Location somewhere south of Fort Yukon. Advise speed and caution. N. T. S."

"Well, now, what do you think of that!" exclaimed Joe.

"I think," said Curlie, "that we have put one over on our old friend up north there who persists in raising hob in the air.

"You see," he went on more soberly, "it's a very recent invention. You slip a little affair on your sending instrument, which tears your tones all into little bits and sends them out as so much mental mince pie. But this little instru-

ment here straightens them out for the person at the other end and gives them to him just as they have been spoken. I feel sure that the man we are after does not possess one of the outfits. That means that we may speak with Valdez at any time without fear of detection. All that an outside party gets is a jumble of sounds.

"If we ever get separated on the trail we may speak to one another in the same way. You have that small, reserve sending and receiving set on your sled and I am going to give you a set of these new instruments.

"Once more," he smiled, "I want to state that it is my belief that if you keep your little radiophone dry and tuned up, it will help you out of any dangerous position."

Had they known under what strange circumstances this belief would be tried in the days to come and on this very trip, the two boys might not have laughed quite so merrily as Curlie again threw on the radiophone and they listened to jazz being broadcasted from Seattle.

Joe, tired out from the day's struggle over the glacier, feeling the cozy warmth of the fire, stretched himself out on his sleeping-bag and fell at once into a drowsy slumber.

"Here," said Curlie, noting the eager manner in which Jennings listened to the bits of music and gossip which drifted in from the air, "you listen with this." He snapped a receiver over the miner's head. "I've got to shut off that loud-speaker. Want to listen in and see what I can catch."

For a time he listened on short wave lengths for his friend, the Whisperer. At last, having given that up, he tuned in on long wave lengths and at once began picking up something.

Having tuned his instrument accurately and adjusted his coil aerial, he succeeded in listening in in a very satisfactory matter.

"Big business," he whispered to himself. "Shouldn't wonder if that was a clue."

It was indeed big business that was flashing through the air that night. It was the report of a government official, the announcement of the

securing of sufficient evidence at Nome, Alaska, to convict a bold band of smugglers who had been carrying valuable jewels, taken from rich families in Russia, into America by way of Alaska. These smugglers had escaped detection for some time by traveling in native skin-boats across Behring Straits. In some way, Curlie could hardly make out how, the great explorer Munson had been of assistance to the government in bringing these men to justice. Because of this service the government was instructing all its officials, especially wireless operators, to lend every assistance possible to Munson in his dash to the Pole.

"Don't see how a fellow three thousand miles away can help an explorer reach the Pole," Curlie told himself, "but I suppose there must be a way—"

His thoughts were cut short by an interruption to the message. Someone with a powerful sending set had cut loose into the air with his sparker. The result was utter bedlam of the air. Not one word could be recognized.

"That's the man," Curlie breathed excitedly, "that's the fellow I'm after! Now for his location."

His fingers moved rapidly from instrument to pencil and paper, then back to instrument again. There was a look of tense excitement on his face, such a look as comes upon the hunter as he sights a moose not a hundred yards away. Curlie was a born hunter, a hunter of the air. He had got scent of a prey, a dangerous prey, and was at this moment hunting him down.

"There," he breathed as the bedlam ceased, and he drew the receiver from his head. "I know where you are, at least. You're moving. I wonder if we'll meet and when. I know what I'm going to say to you when we meet. Wonder if you know what you're going to say to me!"

Having packed his instruments away, he stretched himself out before the fire to think. Events were moving on apace. It looked as if his journey would be shorter than he had at first believed it would be. You never could tell, though. He thought for the hundredth time of

the Whisperer; wondered who she really was and why her whisper had been missing to-night.

At last, reaching over to Joe, he shook him into wakefulness and told him to turn in. Having undressed, he slipped on a suit of pajamas, crept into his sleeping-bag and was soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER IV

JOE MISSING

Curlie Carson was worried. As he sat on his rolled-up sleeping-bag in the tent which had been set with the usual care for a night's comfort, his fingers drummed incessantly on the box which held his three-stage amplifier, while he muttered ever now and again:

"Wish he'd come. I don't like the looks of it. What's keeping him? That's what I'd like to know."

Joe was three hours overdue. After many days of travel they had made their way far into the interior of Alaska, well away toward the Yukon. Day by day they had broken trail for their dogs and day by day moved forward. At first the trail had been hard-packed from many dog teams passing from village to village. But as they pushed farther and farther into the

wilderness these villages had vanished. Towns that were towns only in name greeted them now as they advanced. An Indian's hovel here, the shack of a long-bearded patriarch of a miner there, that was all.

Snow had fallen in abundance. They were obliged to break every foot of trail before their dog teams.

Food was scarce. The question of feeding their dogs had become a problem. Then, only this very afternoon an Indian had told of a cache of caribou meat some ten miles away in the forest. If they would wait for him to bring it, they would have fine fresh meat in abundance.

The boys had debated the question. They were eager to go forward. A whispered message of the night before had led them to believe that their quest was nearing its end; that the man they sought was not far before them on the trail; yet the dogs must be fed.

It had been decided at last that Joe Marion with an all but empty sled should await the

supply of meat, while the others pressed on breaking the trail until near nightfall, when they would make camp and await his arrival.

Curlie and Jennings had carried out their part of the program, but when he should have arrived Joe had not appeared, rounding the clump of spruce trees to the south of them.

After an hour of anxious waiting, Jennings, taking his rifle, had gone out to search for him.

"May have lost his way," he had commented.

Curlie had remained to listen in on his radiophone. Joe carried with him, attached to his sled, a complete sending and receiving set. In time of trouble the first thing he would think of would be getting off a radiophone message to his companions.

"Ought to be getting something," Curlie mumbled. "I wonder what could have happened? I wonder — "

He paused for reflection. Night by night as he had sat upon his sleeping-bag, listening in, strange messages had come to him from the sky. Now the rude interference of the unknown man

who had been tearing up the traffic of the air told Curlie that they were coming closer to one another, and now the whisper of the girl, that ghostlike creature who appeared to haunt the track of the lawbreaker, told Curlie of the day fast approaching when he and the outlaw of the air must meet face to face. At such times he had wondered if he should then meet the girl as well as the man.

On the previous night the whisper had informed him that they were but seventy-five miles apart.

"Coming, coming," Curlie had whispered to himself.

The trail had been heavy. They had made but fifteen miles. What of the stranger? How far had he come?

Curlie's heart skipped a beat at the realization that he must be very near at hand.

At the same time there came a disturbing question. Had this man of evil intentions somehow stolen a march on them? Had he been in league with the Indian who had claimed

to possess a supply of caribou meat? Had this been but a ruse to get them separated?

"Well, if it was, it's been a complete success," he exclaimed. "Three of us and not one of us knows where the others are."

Turning, he reached for a box-magazine rifle. After examining the clip in the chamber, he slipped three other loaded ones in his pockets.

"You can never tell," he whispered, "you sure can not."

A great silence hovered over the forest which bounded the banks of the Tanana River. Such silences existed in these Arctic wilds as Curlie had never before experienced.

"Fairly spooky," he whispered to himself. "Wish I could hear something — wind in the treetops, even. But there's not a breath."

The forest lay all about him. Everywhere the ground was buried in two feet of snow. Muffled footsteps might at this moment be approaching the camp.

At last, unable to bear it longer, he snapped off the radiophone for a moment to adjust a

smaller set and tune it to 200, the wave length he and Joe had agreed to use if in distress.

When this smaller set had been called into action, he tuned the larger set to longer wave lengths. He hoped to catch some sound from the air which might relieve the awful silence.

"Wonderful thing this radiophone," he told himself. "Great boon to the Arctic. Think of the trader, the trapper, the gold hunter alone in his cabin, tired of the sound of his own voice and that of his dog. Think of being able to tune in on his radio and bring down snatches of song, of instrumental music and of ordinary conversation, right out of the air — some young girl sending her lover a good-night kiss, for instance," he chuckled to himself. "But — "

He paused abruptly. He was getting something on the long wave lengths. Faint, indistinct at first came the message. Yet he caught it clearly. His nerves tingled as he listened. It was Munson, the great Arctic explorer. He was attempting to inform the outside world, especially the men who had financed his ex-

pedition, of his plans. He had established a large supply station on Flaxman Island; then he had pushed fearlessly out through the floes toward the Pole. His ship was strongly built, with an extra covering of iron-wood on its keel. Its engines were powerful. He would go as far as the steamer would carry him, then he would hop off in an airplane and attempt the Pole. He was supplied with three airplanes. In these, if his ship should be wrecked, he would be able to carry his entire company and crew to the supply house on Flaxman Island.

This brief report was followed by a personal message to his wife, then the air was once more clear. The old, monotonous silence settled down upon Curlie's little world. During all the time he had listened in, his fingers had been flying across a sheet of paper. He had written down the message. It was within the realm of possibility that he was the only operator who had got it. In that case it would be his duty to relay it to those for whom it was intended.

During all this time one question had been

revolving in his mind: Why had not the man he sought, the outlaw of the air, broken in on this message? He had been informed that this man had taken delight in breaking up Munson's communications. Why then this silence? Could it be that he himself was out scouting around, trying to ambush Joe and Jennings and in time even Curlie himself? Or was he merely afraid of being detected at this time?

"Possibly," said Curlie to himself, "there was something about that message which interested him. In that case he would want to hear to the end."

Suddenly his hand made a clutch at his rifle. What was that? Had he caught the sound of a footstep or was it merely a white owl flapping his wings? He sat there listening, scarcely breathing, awaiting he hardly knew what. And, at this moment, on the 200 meter wave lengths a message came to his waiting ears.

CHAPTER V

DANGEROUS BUSINESS

The Indian who had promised to provide the boys with caribou meat had not deceived them. At the appointed hour he had returned with an abundant supply.

In his eagerness to secure provisions for a long lap of the journey, Joe had piled his sled high with meat. In doing this he had made a mistake, but this he did not know at the time.

Having paid the Indian, he lashed his rifle to the top of the load, and, shouting to his dogs, went racing away after his companions.

The short day was nearing its close when, on passing a turn in the trail, Joe found himself swinging out of the forest into an open stretch of wild meadow.

He had hardly made a hundred rods of this

open trail when he heard a sharp howl which came from the edge of the forest.

"Wolves!" he muttered. "Caught the scent of this meat. Indians say it has been a bad winter for wolves. Starving, I guess. Well, we'll show those boys our heels."

Reaching out to the sled as he traveled forward, he unlashed his rifle and threw it across his arm. As he did so, he caught his breath. There were, he suddenly remembered, but four cartridges in the rifle and none on the sled. Their supply of ammunition was on Curlie's sled.

Shouting at the dogs, he gripped the handle of the sled with one hand and with the rifle poised in the other, went pit-patting along over the trail.

He had reached the center of the open space and was hoping to arrive at the forest soon and find the others encamped there, when tragedy suddenly descended upon him.

A dull crash was followed by a sickening thud. The sled, having been twisted sideways

in crossing a dry ravine, had crumpled down. Springing forward, the boy found that all the lashings and braces of one runner were torn away.

"Smashed beyond repair," he muttered. "Now how am I going to get that meat to camp?"

He thought of unhitching the dogs and of clinging to the main draw rope as he raced away to his friends for aid. This thought was speedily banished when a dismal, long-drawn howl came from the edge of the forest.

"Wolves," he muttered. "They'd eat it all."

He thought of making the canvas covering of his pack into an improvised sled and placing the meat upon it, of hitching the dogs to that.

"Don't believe they could haul it," he decided. "The trail's too narrow. Snow on sides is too deep."

Again there came the dismal howl. This time it was followed by a yap-yap-yap. To the boy's consternation, this yapping was answered from a dozen points at once.

"Lot of them out there. Gaunt, hungry beasts. Dangerous, I guess."

Again he thought of the four cartridges. They were not enough. He might be obliged to cut his team loose and make a dash for it.

The dogs heard the challenging call from the wild creatures of the forest and bunched together as if for defense. Their manes stood straight up. The leader, a part-hound, was growling in a low tone, as if talking to himself.

This team of five dogs which Joe drove was a pick-up team. Besides the part-hound leader, there was one huskie and three dogs of uncertain breed. The huskie's team mate, Sport, was slight of build and inclined to shirk. The two "wheel-horses" were short, stocky fellows who worked well in traces and showed signs of being good fighters.

Like some scout preparing for an Indian attack, Joe now loosened the dogs' traces from the sled. But that they might not rush out heedless of danger to be cut up by the merciless fangs of the wolves he chained each dog to the sled.

"Time enough to let you at them later," he murmured. He felt a certain amount of security in their companionship.

Just what he meant to do, he did not for the moment know. Darkness had fallen. Like twin glowworms, the eyes of the wolves shone at the edge of the forest. Already some of them were creeping out into the open. There were a number of them; just how many he could not tell.

"The one that sent out the call was probably the daddy of a large family," he told himself, "and he's invited the whole family to a feast. But," he said as he set his teeth hard, "there won't be any feast if I can help it."

Leaning his rifle against the sled, he dropped his chin on his hands to lapse into deep thought. Then suddenly he leaped into action.

"Why didn't I think of that before?" he exclaimed as he tore at the wrappings of the sled.

He had thought of the radiophone equipment packed away on his sled, the reserve outfit which always rode there.

"If I can only get it set up," he told himself, "I'll be able to call Curlie. Then he and Jennings will make a dash for it. With rifles and plenty of ammunition they'll beat the wolves off. We'll feed some of their carcasses to the dogs and have that much more caribou meat for ourselves."

His fingers trembled as he unpacked the detector and set it firmly upon the overturned sled. He had caught the gleam of a pair of flashing eyes much closer than he had thought the wolves would dare to come. He had caught, too, the ominous sound of chop-chopping jaws. Pete, the huskie, was ki-yi-ing and straining at his chain. Major, the dog who always guarded the sled at night, was sending forth a low rumbling challenge.

As Joe set his amplifier into position, he sent a flash of light from his electric torch full upon one of those gray beasts. The wolf, recoiling as if shot by a rifle, doubled into a heap, then sprang snarling away.

Joe laughed at this wild demonstration of

fear. The next instant his face sobered. He was surprised at the size of these timber wolves and at their gauntness.

"Starved to skin and bones. Ready for anything," he muttered grimly as he set two jointed poles straight up in the snow.

From the top of these poles hung suspended his coil aerial. There remained but to connect the batteries. He was bent over the sled, intent upon making these connections secure, when he was startled by a mad chop of jaws directly behind him. The next instant there was a wild whirling of legs and fur, as Major engaged a wolf in combat.

Snatching his rifle, Joe stood ready to do deadly execution once the combatants separated.

"But only four cartridges," he breathed, "and my call for help not yet sent." His heart sank.

CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLE CRY

Even hampered as he was by the chain attached to his collar, the faithful old watchdog was more than a match for his lighter opponent. Over and over they tumbled. Twice the chain, tangling about the wolf's legs, seemed about to make him prisoner. At last with a savage onslaught Major leaped clean at the enemy's throat. There followed a gurgling cough. For a second the end seemed at hand. But the next instant, Major's teeth lost their grip. The wolf, feeling himself free, and having had quite enough, slunk away into the shadows.

"Might as well let him go," was the boy's mental comment. "He's well licked. He'll not want to come back. Save my shots for those who mix in next."

In this, perhaps he made a mistake. Bleed-

ing from many wounds, the wolf carried a rank scent of battle and blood back to his companions, a scent more maddening than was that of the frozen meat upon the sled. Hardly had he disappeared into the darkness than there arose from out that darkness a war song such as Joe had never before given ear to, a song that made his blood run cold.

"Not a second to lose," he exclaimed as he snapped the receiver over his head, threw on the switch and pressed his lips to the transmitter.

He was talking on 200. "Hello! Hello! Curlie, you hear? Wolves. Six miles from Indian's shack. Sled broken. Must fight for life. Got four shots. Bring rifles. Come quick."

Eagerly he pressed the receivers to his ears. Wildly his heart beat. It was a tense moment. Would Curlie be listening in on 200? Would the message carry? Would he respond?

After a moment had elapsed, with the gleam of eyes coming ever closer, he repeated his

message. Again he pressed the receivers to his ears.

"He won't hear," he muttered half in despair. "Have to make a dash for it. Meat might save us — might satisfy them. But they're mad with the smell of fresh food. They're"—

A voice boomed in his ear. It was Curlie.

"Coming," he roared. "Hold fast."

"Ah!" Joe breathed as he snatched the receiver from his head and clutched at his rifle, "that's better!"

Even as he said it, a flash from his electric torch caught a huge fellow, the leader of the pack, all but upon them. Like the other, he doubled up and leaped away, but this only made the boy understand that his position was still perilous. Curlie had not told him how far he was away.

"Must be at least five miles," he groaned. "Take him a half hour. Major, old boy, do you think we can hold them?" The answer from the dog was a low, rumbling growl.

There was a deal of comfort to be obtained from that growl. Heretofore Joe had thought of these sled-dogs as mere beasts of burden; thought of them as he might have thought of horses or mules on the flat, sleepy, safe prairies of the Mississippi valley. Now he found himself regarding them as friends, as fellow warriors engaged in a common business, the business of protecting their lives against the onrush of the enemy.

"Some dogs you are," he murmured gratefully. "You not only pull a fellow's load for him, but in time of danger you turn in and fight for him."

He knew that if he came out of this combat alive he would always cherish a feeling of loyal friendship for these five companions in combat.

It was a tense moment. They were in a tight place. A chill raced up his spine and his knees trembled as he caught the gleam of new pairs of eyes burning holes into the darkness. Others had heard the blood-curdling war song and had come to join in the battle.

The flash of the torch held the beasts at bay for a time, but at last it only maddened them as they pressed closer in.

Joe was in despair. Should he loose the dogs? He scarcely dared. They would rush out at those burning eyes and be destroyed. Then he would be alone. And yet, if worse came to worst, if the enemy rushed in, there would not be time to loose them, and chained as they were, the dogs would fight at a disadvantage.

In the meantime, Curlie Carson was bounding over the trail. Now he had covered a mile, now two, now three. There were three miles more. Panting, perspiring, staggering forward, now tripping over a snow-covered bush, and now falling over a log, he struggled on.

"He — he can't make it!" Joe all but sobbed as he counted the moments! "Ah, here they come!"

There was time only to loose the chain of Major before three gray streaks leaped at them.

Major met one and downed him. Ginger, the hound leader, chained as he was, grappled with a second. The third leaped at the boy's throat. Just in time he threw up the rifle barrel. Gripped in both his hands, it stopped the beast. Kicking out with his right foot, he sent him sprawling. The next instant the rifle cracked. One shot gone, but an enemy accounted for.

A fourth wolf sprang upon the gentle, inoffensive Sport and bore him to the snow.

Leaping upon the sled, Joe stood ready to sell his life as dearly as he might. Catching the ki-yi of Pete, the huskie, he reached over and unsnapped his chain, to see him leap at the throat of the nearest enemy. "They're coming, coming!" Joe sang out.

All fear had left him now. He was in the midst of a battle. That they would win that battle he did not dream. Curlie could never reach them in time. But, like Custer's men, they would die game.

Sport was down. Major was strangling the

life from a clawing wolf. Ginger was engaged in an unfinished battle. Two wolves leaped at the sled, one from either side. The rifle cracked. A wolf leaped high and fell. The second sprang. He was instantly met and borne to the snow by Bones, the second "wheel-horse."

But now they came in a drove, five, six, seven, gaunt gray beasts with chop-chopping jaws.

With deliberate aim the boy dropped the foremost, then the second. Then, calmly clubbing his rifle, he waited.

The foremost wolf was not two yards from the sled, when Joe was startled to hear a rifle crack and see the wolf leap high in air. He was astonished. Curlie could not possibly have reached his objective in this time. Who was this man, his deliverer? Leaning far forward, he tried to peer into the darkness, as the rifle cracked again and yet again.

CHAPTER VII

REVENGE FOR A LOST COMRADE

For a second, as he stood there on the sled, with the big Arctic moon rising above the forest, with the crack of the strange rifle, the roar of dogs and the howl of wolves dinning in his ears, Joe fancied himself acting a part in the movies. It was too strange to seem real.

This lasted but a second; then, realizing that the battle was more than half won but that some of his dogs might be in danger, he sprang from the sled. The next instant with the butt of his rifle he crushed the skull of a wolf whose fangs were tearing at the throat of a dog. The wolf, crumpling over, lay quivering in death.

As he bent over the prostrate dog he saw that it was Sport.

Frightened, bewildered, disheartened by the crack-crack of the newcomer's rifle, the remnant

of the wolf-pack took to its heels. Soon save for the growl and whine of dogs, silence reigned in meadow and forest.

The man with the rifle stepped forward. To Joe's surprise he saw that it was Jennings.

"Why! It's you!" he exclaimed.

"Who did you think it might be?" laughed the miner.

"Why, it might have been most anyone. Might even have been the man Curlie's looking for, the outlaw of the air. I thought you were with Curlie. Curlie's coming — must be most of the way here."

"Then," said Jennings quickly, "I'd better go back and meet him, then he and I will go back and bring the other sleds. Here," he handed Joe two clips of cartridges, "guess they'll not come back. Never can tell though. You'll be safe with these." He turned and walked quickly away.

Left with his dogs and his outfit, Joe made a thorough examination of things. Three of his dogs, Ginger, the leader, Major, the sled guard,

and Bones, his team-mate, were sitting on their haunches or curled up licking their wounds.

"Sport's done in," he murmured with a queer catch in his throat. "Dogs get to be a fellow's pals up here. Pete's missing. Rushed out after the retreating enemy to avenge his team-mate, I guess. Only hope he doesn't get the worst of it."

Five dead wolves lay near the sled. These he dragged into a pile. "Enough pelts there for a splendid rug," he told himself. "I'll get some Indian woman to tan them."

Then, realizing that it would be some time before his companions would return, and having nothing else to do, he began skinning the carcasses. He had nearly completed the task when, from the edge of the forest, there came a long-drawn howl.

"What, again?" he exclaimed seizing his rifle. "All right, come on. I'm ready for you this time."

A pair of fiery balls shone out of the shadowy edge of the forest.

Lifting his rifle he took steady aim. His breath came quick. To shoot in the quiet calm of perfect self-composure was quite different from a pitched battle.

He had a perfect bead on the spot between the eyes, when the creature moved.

He came a few paces closer; then again halted and howled.

And now once more the boy had a perfect aim. His finger was on the trigger. It was a high-power rifle. The shot could not fail.

"Now!" he whispered to himself. "Now!"

But at that instant a strange thing happened. Old Ginger, the leader, answered the creature's call. The answer was not hostile but friendly.

Joe's rifle dropped with a soft plump into the snow. The next instant he cupped his hands and shouted.

"Pete! Pete, you old fool, come on in here. You nearly got shot."

It was indeed Pete, the huskie. He had returned safely from his expedition of revenge for a lost comrade.

As he came trotting in, head up and ears pricked forward, he marched straight up to Joe, as a huskie will, and jamming his nose straight against his leg, gave a big sniff. After that he curled up with his comrades to lick his wounds.

Two hours later the camp in the forest was once more in order. The meat had been piled high upon a hastily made cache of strong boughs, roped between trees. The dogs had been bedded down with spruce boughs. All was snug for the night.

They were preparing to turn in. To-morrow would be a busy day. They would spend the greater part of it in camp. The broken sled must be mended. Joe's dogs must be allowed to recover from the first shock of the battle. Jennings would repair the sled. Curlie and Joe would go ahead breaking the trail on snowshoes for a few miles. This would be the day's work; that and keeping a sharp lookout for the outlaw of the air.

"The outlaw of the air!" Curlie was thinking of him when there came a rattle from the

loud-speaker attached to the receiving set tuned for long wave lengths.

Leaping to the tuner, he touched its knob, twisted it first this way, then that. He touched a second and a third knob, then bent his ear for the message.

"Another government affair," he told himself. Then, suddenly, as if bursting out from the very room, came a loud, "Bar-r-r-r!"

Instantly his hands flew to the radio-compass as he muttered.

"That's him, the outlaw!"

He measured the distance accurately, calculated the direction, then located it on the map.

"There!" he murmured. "He's right there. Not forty miles. A little off the trail. For safety from discovery I suppose. Camped there for the night. By a forced march we could reach that spot before nightfall tomorrow. Question is, shall we do it?"

Throwing on his coat, he went out of the tent. There for ten minutes he bathed his temples, throbbing with excitement, in the cold

night air. Pacing up and down on the narrow trail he debated the problem.

"If we try to steal upon him, he may discover us first and elude us," he told himself. "If he does that, probably we can't catch him, for his dogs will be fresher than ours. If we wait for him here, he may take some Indian trail which cuts around this point and we may never see him. So there it is."

It was a difficult decision but much quiet thinking led him to believe that there was more to be gained by waiting than by moving. They ought not break trail beyond the point where they now were. That would but give the man warning. Early in the morning, he would send Joe exploring across-trail for any other trail that might pass close to this one. They would move camp to a position a few yards off trail in the forest. Then he would set a watch.

Instinctively, as he entered the tent, he examined the clip of cartridges in his rifle.

"Not looking for him to-night, are you?" grinned Joe.

"No, not looking for him, but you never can tell," said Curlie soberly.

"Think it's necessary to set a watch?"

"No. That dog that guards your sled, old Major, is watch enough. He'll let us know if anyone comes down the trail, and even if they should attempt to escape us they couldn't do it — not with two of our teams in prime condition."

CHAPTER VIII

A WATCH AT THE SIDE OF THE TRAIL

Early next morning Curlie established himself in the midst of a thick clump of young pine trees where he could keep a constant watch on the trail and not be seen by anyone approaching.

He had dragged into the clump a number of spruce boughs. On these he sat. On one side of him was his smaller radiophone receiving set and on the other his rifle. The receiver of the radiophone was clamped over his ears beneath his cap. This day he was to be a detective of the earth as well as of the air.

The camp had been moved well back from the trail, where without danger of being heard Jennings could work upon the broken sled. Whether their quarry were caught in their trap this day or not, they must be prepared to travel on the morrow.

As he sat there with his eyes moving up and down the trail he thought of the adventures his calling as a secret service man of the air had brought him. He recalled those wild hours on the tossing sea when death appeared so near that it seemed almost to beckon. He thought of the girl, Gladys Ardmore, who had behaved so bravely on that night. He wondered what she might be doing at that moment.

Then his mind carried him back to the adventure which appeared to be just before him. The man he was seeking had repeatedly broken all the laws of the air. He was subject not only to heavy fines but also to long years of imprisonment. That he would fight and willingly commit murder to escape punishment Curlie did not doubt. Yet here was Curlie, ready and willing to attempt to stop him in his mad career.

"One does not do such a thing for himself," he reasoned. "He does it for the good of others. Here in Alaska are thousands of lonely

people who can be cheered by music, stories and speeches broadcasted over thousands of miles. Yet a few outlaws of the air can spoil all that. It is the duty of some of us to see that they do not do it. There are matters of even greater importance; a miner lost on the tundra, snow-blind and all but hopeless, can, if he has a small radiophone set, send out a call for aid. From a large station this message may be picked up. He may be located and his life saved. Even the great explorer, Munson, may need some such assistance."

Had he known how prophetic this last thought was, and how much he was to have to do with the explorer who was at that moment more than two thousand miles away on a ship beset by the perpetual ice of the Arctic, he would have been startled.

As it was, his mind turned to the mystery that always surrounds true adventure. He recalled the words of an old friend:

"Adventure, true adventure, like fame, does not come to those who seek it. It comes un-

beckoned and unannounced. Oh! yes, you can blunder about and get into all kind of scrapes which really do not mean anything to yourself nor to anyone else, but that is not adventure. You may even succeed in getting yourself killed without experiencing an adventure.

"You'll know an adventure when you see it. When, with no willing of your own, but following the plain lead of duty, you feel yourself going into something as dark and mysterious as an unexplored cave; when your heart beats madly, your knees tremble and your tongue clings to the roof of your mouth, yet you go straight on because you know that duty leads you, then you may be sure that you are about to enter upon a genuine adventure."

As Curlie recalled these words he wondered whether or not, before the day was done, he would find himself entering upon a true adventure. Would his quarry, the outlaw of the air, come down the trail?

The day wore on. Noon came. He ate a frozen lunch. The sun sank lower and lower.

His vigil did not relax, but he began to lose faith in his plan.

"Joe said he would come and tell me if he found other trails," he told himself. "The outlaw can't have gone round us. Where can he be? If we've missed him — well, anyway, he can't escape us. They'll take him when he enters Valdez."

And yet, as he thought it through, he was not so sure of it. The man was utterly unknown. Not one person who was in any way interested in his capture had ever seen him. Hundreds of strange men drifted in and out of the seaport city of Valdez every day. How then was anyone to put his hand on any one of them and say, "This is the man"?

He was interrupted in these disconcerting reflections by a sound in his receiver. It was a whisper — *the* whisper.

"Hello - hello - Curlie," it said. "Hello - are - you - there? Do - you - hear - me? I - have - something - important — dreadfully - important — to say. He — the - man - you -

want — has - turned - back. Went - forty - miles - to-day. Now he - is camped. So - you - see - you - did - not - get - him - did - you - Curlie? I - am - sorry - Curlie - extremely - sorry - for - he - goes - fast — very - very - fast. You - cannot - catch - him - can - you - Curlie? So - good-bye."

As the sound ceased, Curlie leaped to his feet. His fists were clenched. Through his tight set teeth he hissed: "I can catch him! I can! I can! And I will."

Hastily gathering up his equipment and his rifle he hurried away at once to break the news to his companions.

Strange to say, in all this time it had never occurred to him to doubt the truth of the Whisperer's message nor to question her sincerity in wishing him well or in desiring to assist him. And yet she had been playing a very artful game of hide-and-go-seek in the air with him for many weeks and in all that time, except perhaps that time in the hotel window (told about in "Curlie Carson Listens In"), he had

not caught one single glimpse of her. He had heard her whisper, that was all. Can one judge a person's character by the quality of his whisper? Well, that's the question.

CHAPTER IX

WHO IS THIS WHISPERER?

"What does it mean?" puzzled Joe, as Curlie reported the Whisperer's message. "Did he listen in last night when I was calling for help? And was he frightened by that?"

"Might have," said Curlie, "but anyway you couldn't help that. You were in a mess and had to be helped out."

For a moment the two boys were silent. Then Curlie spoke again:

"Might not be that at all. I listened in on a message last night. It was from Munson, the explorer. It was not broken in upon as his others have been. There may have been something in that message which caused the outlaw to turn back."

"Well, anyway," he exclaimed, "whatever the cause is, we'll go out and after them the first

thing after dawn. Is everything all right; sled fixed and dogs doctored up?"

"Everything's fine as silk."

"All right then, let's have some chow. After that we'll turn in. Luck doesn't go with any one person forever. Why, even to-morrow we might catch up with our outlaw friend."

"Hardly that," smiled Joe. "We've got forty or fifty miles of unbroken trail to make before we really get on the scent at all. By that time, traveling on a hard-packed trail as he is, he'll have a big lead on us. There are probably forks and crosses in the trail a hundred miles or so farther on, so we've got a real task ahead of us. We'll have to be sly as foxes to catch him now."

"I suppose that's so," Curlie sighed, "but we'll get him, see if we don't."

"Say!" exclaimed Joe suddenly, "who is this whispering friend of yours anyway?"

"Don't know," said Curlie, scratching his head.

"Ever seen her?"

"I don't know."

"How's she come to be traveling with this man anyway?"

"Can't say."

"Mighty queer, I'd say."

"I'd say as much myself. Queer and interesting. I may as well admit that I am as much interested in coming up with the Whisperer as I am in catching this outlaw."

"Well, we won't do either if we don't eat and turn in," said Joe as he reached for the frying pan.

Joe's prophecy that they would not at once catch up with the man they sought, proved correct. The first two days they struggled forward through soft snow, over a trackless wilderness. Then they came upon the camp-site of the outlaw, his last camping place before he turned back.

To Curlie this was a thrilling moment. It was the first earthly sign he had ever seen of this strange pair, the outlaw and the Whisperer. Heretofore he had followed only the trackless

trail of the air. Now he had footprints of a man and of many dogs to go by. The mark of the camp, though three days old, was as fresh as if it had been abandoned but two hours before. There had been no snowfall. There was never a breath of wind in that forest.

"As long as his trail is not joined by any other," Jennings told the boys, "we can follow it with our eyes shut. We could do that three months from now. There might be four feet of snowfall, but on top of it all there would be the depression made in the first two feet of snow. There is never any wind to move the snow about, so there's your trail carved in the snow, permanent as marble till the spring thaw comes."

"But when he comes to the Yukon River trail?" suggested Curlie.

"Well, that's going to be harder." The miner wrinkled his brow. "But we'll find a way to track him — the way he hitches his dogs, track of his sled. There's always something if you are sharp enough to see it."

Curlie examined the marks of the camp very carefully. It was evident that the man knew as much about making an Arctic camp as did Jennings. The square made by the tent floor showed that he had spread down a canvas floor and the heaps of spruce twigs tossed all about told that he had bedded the place down before he spread out his blankets or sleeping-bags.

"Two teams," was Jennings' comment, "and eight or nine dogs to the team. Fine big fellows too. Shouldn't wonder if they were Siberian wolf hounds."

One thing Curlie made a secret search for: footprints. There were enough of one sort. The broad marks of a man's foot clad in moccasins or Eskimo skin-boots were everywhere present. What he sought was the mark of a smaller foot, a much smaller foot, the foot of the Whisperer. But though he examined every square yard of trampled ground around the camp, and though he ran ahead of the dogs for two miles after resuming the trail, he saw no trace of a woman's footprint.

"Looks like he drove one dog team and led the other," he told himself. "Looks as if — "

For the first time he began to doubt the existence of the Whisperer.

"Can it be," he asked himself, "that the outlaw and the Whisperer are one? Does he change his voice and pretend to give me tips when he is in reality only leading me on?"

In his mind he went back over the times when the Whisperer had broken in on the silence of the night. There had been those two times when he had been listening in at the Secret Tower Room, back there in the city (told about in "Curlie Carson Listens In"). There had been two times when he had caught her whisper out over the sea.

"That time," he told himself, "she told me he had gone north. Why should this man keep me informed of his own doings? He ought to know that I'd report it; that someone would follow him if I didn't.

"No," he told himself, "there must be a real Whisperer. The girl must exist. She's

somewhere up there on the trail ahead of us. And yet," he reasoned, "if she is there, where are her tracks?"

Again he began convincing himself that she did not exist, that it was all a hoax invented by the mind of this clever outlaw. The more he thought of it the more sure he became that this was true. The more sure he became of it the more his anger grew.

"To be shamed, to be tricked, deceived, buncoed by the man you are pursuing!" he exploded. "That is adding insult to injury!"

With the plain trail stretching straight out before them, they now traveled far into the night, traveled until dogs and men were ready to drop. Only then did they turn to the right of the trail and set their weary muscles to the task of making camp.

CHAPTER X

ON THE YUKON

To follow the trail of the outlaw of the air for the first four days was but to trace out his sled-tracks in a wilderness that was trackless save for the footprints of caribou, wolf and bear. But once he had reached the Yukon, all this was changed. There were three trails to choose from. Which had he taken? The one to the left which led up the river, the one to the right, down the river; or the one which led straight before them up one of the branches of the mighty Yukon? The last trail, less traveled than the others, led away toward the Arctic Ocean.

"He may have taken the down-river trail, for that would carry him farther and farther from communication with the outside world," said Jennings, as he searched in vain to dis-

tinguish his track from those of scores of other travelers.

"Might have taken the up-river trail," he went on. "He'd be in some danger of getting caught by a message sent on ahead but since the telegraph wires are down the message would have to be sent by radiophone, so he could listen in and take up some branch and over the hills if he needed to."

"You don't think he'd go straight ahead, up the branch?" said Curlie.

"Why should he?" the miner looked at him in surprise. "Up that trail for fifty or a hundred miles you'll find Indian huts and miners' cabins here and there. After that you'll find nothing but a blind trail that grows steeper and steeper. There's no food to be had save wild game and little enough of that. Why should he go up there?"

"Might run up there for a blind and live with an Indian for a time."

"If he did we'd trap him like a rabbit in a hollow stump!" declared the miner emphatically.

"Well, since we don't know which way to go and it is getting dark," suggested Joe, "I move that we make camp right here."

This suggestion was acted upon and some two hours later Curlie might have been seen nodding over his radiophone boxes. His companions were fast asleep but he had remained up with the receiver clamped over his head in the rather forlorn hope that the outlaw would let slip some fragment of message which might reveal his whereabouts.

"Fact is," he told himself, "that in spite of all the evidence against it, I still have a sneaking feeling that the Whisperer is a real person, a girl, and that she's up here somewhere in the white wilderness. I — I sort of hope that sooner or later she'll whisper some more secrets to me."

In this hope, for the night at least, he was doomed to disappointment. No whispered secrets came to him from out the air.

A message came, however, a message which set his mind at work. He had fallen quite

asleep when he was suddenly wakened by a voice in his ear. He recognized at once the voice of the government official who had dictated that other message regarding the band of smugglers caught operating on Behring Straits.

The message itself to him was unimportant, or at least for the time it seemed so. It gave more definite details of the evidence procured and stated one fact that was most important: The big man, the one higher up, the brains of the smugglers, had not been apprehended. Indeed, it was not even known who he was. It was thought that he might be at this moment in Alaska, but where? This question could not be answered.

The message had proceeded to this point. Curlie had maintained a drowsy interest in it, when he sat up with a sudden start, all awake.

The message had been broken in upon by a powerful sending set which was much nearer to Curlie than was that of the government man.

"Got — gotta get him," he mumbled as his slim fingers caressed his radio-compass coil.

"There! Got him! That's it!"

He was not a moment too soon, for not only had the message ceased but the interruption as well.

"Huh!" he grunted, scratching his head. "Huh! Up there. Wouldn't have believed it. Why, good gracious, it can't be! Yet I couldn't have missed it. How that man travels! Two hundred miles! And no trail to speak of. Probably none at all."

For a moment he sat in a brown study. Then he suddenly shook his fist toward the north.

"We'll get you now, old boy!" he exclaimed. "We'll get you! You're breaking trail for us. We'll follow that trail if it takes us right out on the ice-floes of the Arctic and we'll get you, just as Jennings says, like a rabbit in a hollow tree. That is," he said more soberly, "if there doesn't come a heavy snow."

The man, so the radio-compass had said, had taken the trail which led straight away toward the Arctic Ocean.

Then for a long time Curlie sat staring at

the knob of his tuner. He did not see the knob. He did not see anything. He was concentrating, reasoning, thinking hard, trying to put a lot of facts together and make them fit.

"So the master-mind of the smugglers had not been caught. What if the outlaw of the air proved to be that man. Why might he not? That would explain why he was so continually breaking in upon the message regarding it.

"And that," he whispered, leaping to his feet and dashing out of the tent in his excitement, "that would explain why he appears so eager to frustrate all of Munson's plans to keep in touch with the outside world by radiophone. Munson assisted in breaking up the smuggler band. If the outlaw is their leader, there is nothing he would not do to wreak revenge.

"And — and" — he breathed hard because of the thoughts that came trooping into his mind — "that might explain the man's change of plans. The very night that Munson sent his message telling of his supply of food on the shore of the ocean this outlaw, who probably listened in,

turned about and started straight north, to — to where?"

Dashing back into the tent, he unfolded a map. For a moment with strained attention he studied it.

When he straightened up it was to whisper, "Yes, sir! That's it! Flaxman Island! His present course will bring him straight to Flaxman Island and Munson's food supply."

He sat down again. "Now," he asked himself, "once he arrives there, what will he do? Will he winter there, living upon the explorer's supplies and thus save himself from prison, or will he, out of revenge, destroy the supplies? If he stays and lives on the supplies, what will happen if Munson comes ashore with his band? Huh, some interesting problems there!"

"Interesting and foolish," he told himself as he dropped into another mood. "All imagination, I guess. Suppose there's nothing to it. Probably he's not the king of smugglers at all, but just a plain mischief-maker of the air. When he caught Joe's message to me, that night

when we fought the wolves, he knew he was being pursued and turned back. Now he's hiding out till the storm blows over. Possibly knows where there is a native reindeer herder up there at the end of the stream and over the hills!

"Well, old top," he again shook his fist toward the north, "you might just as well come out of your hole. The storm isn't going to blow over. Your little cabin of false dreams is going to be wrecked by it, and that before many days."

CHAPTER XI

A MOVING SPOT ON THE HORIZON

But the outlaw's teams of powerful dogs had endurance to exceed anything ever before witnessed by those who followed on their trail. Even Jennings was astonished by the manner in which they ate up the miles.

"Those dogs are devils!" he exclaimed after ten days of trailing them. "Devils is what they are and the prince of devils is their driver."

Straight north the trail ran. There could be no mistaking it. In the soft snow of the forest, as Jennings had said, it might have been followed after three months had elapsed just as surely as on the day after it was made.

Up frozen streams, over ridges when streams were too rapid to freeze even in midwinter, down narrow Indian trails when snow-laden branches constantly showered the traveler with

snow, the trail led. On and on and on. Always, as nearly as possible, due north.

At night, camp made and supper over, Curlie, his instruments before him, his receiver over his head, always sat on his sleeping-bag. With arms crossed over his feet, with head dropping forward, like Jack London's primitive man, he listened for sounds. The sounds he expected to hear were from the air, not from the forest; that was the only difference. Otherwise he was that same primitive man, hunting and being hunted in turn. He was ever pursuing the outlaw, but who could tell when this same outlaw might face about upon the trail and become himself the hunter?

So they moved forward. Once Curlie received a thrill. On examining a camp lately deserted by the one who went before, he came upon a strange footprint, a single print of moccasin or skin-boot in the snow. Yet how it made his heart beat! This footprint was much smaller than that of the outlaw. Could this be the Whisperer? At first it seemed to

him that there could be but one answer: "It is." But at that time they were not beyond the creeks and rivers inhabited and traveled by Indians. Two Indian sleds had not long since passed that way. Might it not be that some Indian woman or girl had visited the camp of the outlaw? So Curlie's certainty was destroyed, yet he still had a feeling that this might have been the footprint of the Whisperer.

Nothing more came to him from the air. The outlaw was silent. So too was the Whisperer. Night after night he caught only now and again a fragment of some song or some orchestra production being broadcasted thousands of miles away. Now and again there would come fragments of messages from afar, but never anything of importance.

From the air they learned nothing of the position of the outlaw, but by examining the signs of camp and trail Jennings, long accustomed to these signs, was able to announce to them each night that they were drawing closer, ever nearer to the man they sought. Now they

were three days' journey from him; now two, now one and a half, now only one. Faint and far distant they fancied they caught sight of the column of smoke rising straight above the forest from his camp fire.

Food became scarce. They had bought dried fish from the last Indian camp they had come upon. Now this had to suffice for both men and dogs. The outlaw, they knew by signs of the trail, had been more fortunate. Once, a reindeer straying from some distant domestic herd had forfeited life by crossing his path; at another time a caribou doe and her fawn had fallen victim to his rifle.

"It's tough luck," Jennings had exclaimed. "Him with all that fresh meat and us with none; but the tables will turn. We're gaining, gaining every day. The soft trail for him becomes hard for us, after the night's freeze. You'll see, we'll get him yet."

"But where do you think he's heading for?" Joe demanded.

"Can't tell," Jennings scratched his head.

"Maybe some Eskimo village, maybe some reindeer camp and maybe — did you say Munson had a supply camp somewhere?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe he's heading for that."

"To use it or destroy it?"

"Destroy it?" Jennings stared at him in astonishment. "What would be the sense of destroying it? He doesn't know he's being followed; leastwise, I don't think he does. Who'd think of destroying a winter's supply of grub? It wasn't Napoleon who burned Moscow, was it?"

Joe did not answer, but he and Curlie had their own private notions about the matter.

Then, just as they hoped to be closing in upon the prey, two things happened which postponed that great event for many days. They came suddenly out upon the open tundra, where the snow was hard-packed by the wind, where the trail was difficult to follow, and where, with as good a trail as the boys had to follow, the soft snow no longer gave them the advantage and

the outlaw could make as good time as they — probably better, for his dogs were stronger.

"Bad luck to us," Jennings stormed. "We'll have to follow him straight to the Arctic and us with no food but a dozen pounds of fish. If we don't watch out we'll be in full retreat, eating our dogs as we go."

Curlie, who had been sitting on his sled silently watching something in the distance, suddenly leaped to his feet exclaiming:

"It moves!"

"What does?" demanded Joe.

"Something off there to the left."

"Think it's him?"

"Who?"

"The outlaw."

"No, I don't. What I do think though is that it's a reindeer or caribou." A moment later he ordered: "Make camp right here. We've got to have meat and this is our chance."

Looking to the clip in his rifle, he turned to go, then, after a second's reflection he turned back, partly unpacked the sled and, having

dragged out a strange-looking belt, buckled it on beneath his mackinaw.

"Just by way of extra precaution," he smiled.

Atop the nearest ridge he turned to wave his hand. Had he known what events would transpire before he saw his companions again he would most surely have turned back. Not knowing, he shaded his eyes for a moment once more to locate the moving spot on the horizon, then went strolling down the low hill.

CHAPTER XII

A BAD FOLLOW UP

Having covered half the distance between himself and the brown spot on the horizon, Curlie decided to drop down below the crest of the hill. By going up a narrow ravine for a half mile, then creeping over the ridge and following down the bend of a second ravine, he would, he was sure, come out close to the feeding animal, quite close enough for a shot.

Stealthily he carried out his plans. When at last he reached the end of this little journey and, with finger on the trigger, slowly rose from the ground where he had been creeping for the last hundred yards, he was so surprised that for a second he felt paralyzed.

There, not twenty yards away, with his back to the boy, feeding like some contented domesticated creature in a pasture, stood as fine a buck

caribou as one might ask to see. The wind being away from him, and toward the boy, he had neither smelled, heard nor seen Curlie. He did not even know of the boy's presence there.

To say that Curlie was suddenly stricken with buck fever, would be putting it mildly. His fingers trembled. Cold perspiration stood out upon his brow.

This lasted but a second, then he was himself again. It was a tense moment. The fate of their expedition might hang upon his shot; the question of going on or turning about must be decided by their ability to procure food.

"How," he whispered, "how in time do you shoot a caribou when he's got his back to you?"

He hesitated. A shot fired now might not reach a vital spot, yet the creature might at any moment sense his presence and go crashing away over the hard-crusted snow.

At this moment he was startled by a loud "ark-ark-ark" to the right and above him.

"Two of 'em," he whispered as he dropped behind his snow bank.

The thing he now witnessed both surprised and amused him. A second caribou had appeared at the crest of a steep hill. Having paused there long enough to call to his companion, instead of racing away to a place of gradual descent, he spread out his snowshoe-like hoofs and with a loud "ark-ark," went scooting, toboggan-fashion, down the hill. So fascinated was Curlie with the sight of this performance that for a moment he forgot his duty to his friends and himself. But just in time he brought himself up with a snap. The rifle went to his shoulder. Just as the second buck, the larger of the two, reached the bottom and stood at attention, the rifle cracked. The buck leaped high, to plunge back upon the snow.

Crack-crack-crack went the hoofs of the first caribou as he raced away, and the crack-crack-crack answered the rifle.

It took not a second glance to tell Curlie that his first shot had reached its mark.

"Think I hit the other. Two's better than one," he muttered as he raced away over the

fresh trail. True enough, there were drops of blood here and there on the snow.

"Went over the ridge. I'll get him!" Curlie snapped a fresh cartridge into his magazine as he went zig-zagging his way up the hard-packed and slippery hill. Twice he lost his footing and narrowly escaped a slide to the bottom, but each time he escaped by digging into the snow with fingers and toes.

At the top he breathed a sigh of relief. For a few seconds he could catch no sight of the caribou, then he saw it disappearing over the next ridge. Just as it dropped from sight, it appeared to stumble and fall.

"Done for!" exulted the boy. "Just one more ridge and I've got him."

For a second he hesitated. It was growing dark.

"Ought to go back," he mumbled. "But there'll be a moon in an hour and I can get along without light till then."

Hurriedly sliding down the ridge, he made his way up the other. Arrived there, he glanced

straight ahead, expecting to see the caribou lying at the bottom of the ravine. But not a brown speck marred the whiteness of that snow.

"That's queer!" he exclaimed. "I was sure he was done for."

By looking closely, he was able to see four sharply-cut paths in the snow crust.

"He tobogganed down and I thought he fell," Curlie grinned. "That's one on me. Well, there's no use to follow him. If he is well enough to go tobogganing, he's not greatly in need of attention. I better get back and tend to the other one."

Darkness had fallen. It was with the greatest difficulty that he made his way back to the spot where the dead caribou lay.

Once there he proceeded to cut up the meat. Then, having built a cache out of blocks of snow which would keep the meat out of reach of wolves and foxes, he shouldered one hind quarter and turned to go.

Then and not till then did he realize that he did not exactly know the way back to camp. He

had come a considerable distance, and in the eager excitement of the hunt had failed to take note of each turn in his trail or to fix in his memory the shapes of the hills about him that they might serve him as guide posts.

"Pretty pickle!" he told himself. "Here I've got a heavy load and I'll likely as not have to walk ten miles to make five. Going to storm, too," he told himself as he studied the hazy horizon. "The mountains were smoking with snow forty miles away this afternoon. Ho, well, guess I'll make it some way."

Shouldering his burden, he went slipping, sliding down the hill. He had not been going many minutes before he realized that he was not going to "make it someway" — not that night at least.

A playful breeze began throwing fine snow in his face. As he approached the crest of a ridge this breeze grew rude. It gave him a shove which landed him halfway back down the hill.

"Stop that, you!" he grumbled as he gathered himself up and attempted the hill anew.

But the thing did not stop. It grew in violence until the boy knew he was facing one of the sudden, severe blizzards known only on the Arctic hills, a storm which no man can face for hours and live.

"It's no use," he told himself. "I'd just blunder round till I'm hot and exhausted, then sit down and freeze. Better sit down here while I'm still all here."

Making his way to a spot somewhat sheltered by a cut bank, he placed his burden on the ground, then set to work with his sheath knife cutting blocks from a snow bank. Out of these he built a snow-fort-like affair which protected him on two sides.

"Wish I knew how to build a snow-house," he told himself. "But I don't, so what's the use to try?"

Having accomplished this much, he cut thin strips of meat from the caribou carcass. These he placed upon the snow. When they had frozen he ate them with relish.

"M-m!" he murmured. "Most as good as

cooked and a whole lot better than dried fish."

Having eaten, he gathered his garments close in about him and sat down upon the ground.

Presently he rose suddenly and, having drawn several small articles from pockets in his belt, proceeded to wind a coil antenna. This when completed he hung to the top of his Alpine staff which he had stuck upright in the snow. Then, having thrust a pair of receivers over his head, he sat down again.

In the belt there was arranged a complete radiophone receiving set with a range of two hundred miles.

"Might hear something more interesting than the storm," he told himself. "B'r'r'r! It's sure going to be bad."

CHAPTER XIII

SAVED BY A WHISPER

Back in the camp Jennings was working on an Eskimo type of harness for Ginger, Joe Marion's leader. The white man's collar, which was very much like a leather horse collar, had worn a sore spot on his neck. A harness made of strips of sealskin and fashioned in a manner somewhat similar to a breast collar, would relieve this.

Joe Marion had gone a short way from camp in the hope of finding a snowshoe rabbit or a ptarmigan. His search had been rewarded. In crossing a low hill he had caught the whir of wings and had, a moment later, sighted three snow-white ptarmigan. These quails of the Arctic wilderness went racing away across the snow. His aim was good and, with all three of

these in his bag, he was sure of some delicious broth and tender, juicy meat that night.

He was searching about for other birds when a sudden gust of wind sent cutting bits of snow into his face.

"Huh!" he grunted, looking away to his left. "Well, now, that looks like business. Came up quick, too. I'd better be getting back."

He had no trouble finding his way back to camp, but by the time he reached it the snow fog was so thick he could not see three rods before him.

He found Jennings struggling with the tent ropes. The tent was in a complete state of collapse.

"Wind tore it down," shouted Jennings. "Give —"

The wind caught the tent and fairly tore it from his grasp.

"Give us a hand," he puffed as he regained his hold. "This is going to be bad. Got to pack up and get out of here and find shelter of some kind. Tent won't stand here."

"There's a lot of willow bushes with the dead leaves on down there by a little stream," suggested Joe.

"That's the place. We can tie the ropes to the willows. Willows keep off the wind. Come on, let's pack up." Jennings threw the tent into a heap.

"But Curlie? He'll be coming back."

"Set up a stake. Write a note. Tell where we've gone. Got a pencil, paper?"

"Yes."

"You write it."

Creeping beneath the overthrown tent, Joe managed to scribble a note. This he fastened securely to an Alpine staff and, having tied a red handkerchief to the staff that Curlie might not miss it, set it solidly in a hard-packed snowbank.

"That'll do," said Jennings. "Now give us a hand. Watch your face; it's freezin'—your cheeks. Take your mitten off and rub 'em."

The dogs, with tails to the wind, stood patiently enduring the storm. But when Jennings

tried to get his team together they backed, twisted and turned in such a manner as to render them useless.

"Here, Ginger," shouted Joe, "here Bones, Pete, Major. Show 'em what a real dog team can do!"

So great was the comradeship between these dogs and their young master that he was able in a moment's time to hitch them to the sled, ready for action.

"Good old boys!" he muttered hoarsely; "we've fought wolves together. Now we'll fight this blizzard."

A sled-load of camp equipment was soon moving down to the willows by the creek bed.

In the course of an hour they had succeeded in establishing a safe and fairly comfortable camp. The dry willow leaves served in lieu of Arctic feathers, while the stems and branches made a crackling fire whose genial warmth pervaded the tent in spite of the storm.

"Now for a feed," said Joe, producing his hunting bag.

"What you got?"

"Ptarmigan. Three of 'em."

"Good!"

"We'll save one for Curlie," said Joe, tossing one of the birds into the corner. "It'll be better piping hot."

"I'm worried about Curlie," said Jennings, cocking his head on one side to listen to the howl of the storm. "This is no night to be out alone. Ought to do something, only we can't; not a thing. Be lost yourself in no time if you went out to look for him."

"You fix these birds and I'll set up the radiophone," suggested Joe. "He took his belt set with him. We can at least listen in for him."

A half hour later, as he sipped a cup of delicious broth, Joe gave an exclamation of disgust:

"What's the good of all my listening in? He can't get a message off. He'd have to have a high aerial for that. Could manage it with balloons on a still night, but not in this gale. Wires would tangle in an instant. You can —"

He broke off abruptly, to clasp his receivers to his ears. He was getting something.

* * * * * * *

Curlie had once read a book written by a man whose daring exploits in the north he had greatly admired. This writer had said that the notion that falling asleep when out in a blizzard might cause one's death by freezing was a great mistake.

"Should you find yourself lost in a blizzard," he remembered the words as well as he might had he read them but an hour before, "seek out a sheltered spot and compose yourself as best you can. Save your strength. If you can fall asleep, so much the better. You will awake refreshed. You will not freeze. If you become chilled, the cold will waken you."

"I wonder if that is true?" he thought to himself as he huddled against the cut bank between his two walls of snow to watch the snow sifting down the hillside like sand down a dune.

He did not attempt to decide whether or not he would put the thing to a test. He merely sat

there until the white, sifting snow became brown and gold, until the gale became a gentle breeze, until all about him was the warmth of a tropical clime.

Before him a palm tree spread its inviting shade. Across the horizon a slow procession moved, camels and horses. "A caravan," he murmured. Then silently the scene shifted. Before him instead of palms were cacti. Instead of camels a great herd of cattle urged on by men on horseback, who swung sombreros and lariats. A cloud of dust followed the herd lazily. But ever just before him the brown sand sifted, sifted, sifted eternally.

Into this scene there moved a beautiful girl. She was dressed in the gay costume of a Mexican; her cheeks were brown with the sun, but she was good to look at. Moving with a strange grace, she came close to him and whispered in his ear. What she said was:

"Curlie! Curlie Carson, are you there?"

The question seemed so strange that he started, and, starting, he suddenly awoke. The

girl and her desert vanished like magic. Before him the sifting still went on, but now again it was sifting snow. Drowsy with fatigue, benumbed but not chilled by the cold, he had fallen asleep and had been dreaming. The two deserts were but dreams.

As he sat there staring at the snow he suddenly realized that part of his dream was reality; the whisper continued:

"Curlie Carson, can you hear me?"

Clapping his hands to his ears, he suddenly realized that his belt radio was working and that the Whisperer had returned.

Springing to his feet, he attempted to grasp the coil aerial. His hands and arms were like blocks of wood.

Madly he thrashed them about until circulation was partially restored. The Whisperer was still speaking. What she said was not as important as the mere fact that she was speaking at all. He had remembered that he was lost. He thought he knew about where she and the outlaw should be located. If he could but dis-

cover the direction from which this whisper came, he might take a course to the left of it and in that way find the camp of his companions. It was a desperate chance but better than none. He was now convinced that the writer of that book was mistaken. He knew now that a person with a clear conscience has no business going to sleep when the mercury is thirty or forty below.

"Are you - there - Curlie?" came the whisper. "I would - have - called - you - sooner Curlie - but I - could not. We - have come - a - long way."

Ah, now his fingers were working. He could move the coil. He held his breath. Had the last word been spoken? Was he lost as before? No!

"Something - tells - me - you - are - near - us - now - Curlie. Do - be - careful. It - is - dangerous - very - very dangerous."

As the whispered words ceased, Curlie's fingers trembled. He had located the Whisperer not forty miles away. He thought he knew the

way back to camp. The wind had fallen somewhat. There was now a chance, a chance for his life. Dragging out his pocket compass, he fought his way to the top of the hill, then mapped out as best he could a course which should take him to camp.

CHAPTER XIV

A STRANGE SIGHT

Before leaving his shelter Curlie hacked from the quarter of caribou meat a piece the size of a roast. This he managed to tie to his back. He then faced up the hill and, having reached the top, scrambled and slid to the valley beyond.

A wild battle with the storm followed. Panting, freezing, aching in every muscle, yet doggedly determined, he fought his way from hilltop to hilltop.

"Ought to be getting near the place," he told himself as he found himself in a valley broader than any other he had crossed. "Nothing looks familiar. Can't see far. Blamed snow keeps blowing so."

Suddenly he stopped short. A black hulk loomed just before him. His heart skipped a

beat? What was it? A cabin? Some Indian's hut? A miner's shack? What a boon in a wild night such as this!

He was not left long in doubt. Pressing eagerly forward for twenty yards he at last paused to exclaim: "Willows! Just willows with dead leaves on!"

But willows were something. They meant a shelter from the blasts of wind which had been slowly beating the life out of him. They meant, too, a possible fire.

"I'll just get into them and see what can be done," he mumbled as he once more beat his way forward.

So great was the relief from getting away from the knife-edged wind that he felt there must be somewhere among the willows a hidden fire.

"Might make one, at that," he told himself.

Struggling through the dense growth, he came at last to an open spot some five yards in diameter which, he decided, was probably a frozen pool. About this the willows grew to

a height of eight feet. The protection from the gale was complete.

"I'll camp here till it blows over!" he thought as he began cutting down some slender willows with his sheath knife. These he spread on the smooth surface of the bare spot. Above them he built a tent-shaped shelter with only one end open. This completed, he began making a pile of dry twigs and leaves. Over this at last he piled larger, green branches. Finally he dug down in the soft snow to where deep beds of mosses lay. These were soft and dry.

"Good tinder," he murmured as he unwrapped a package of matches and struck one of them.

Soon he had a crackling fire.

"That's better," he chuckled. "Much better! Might even do a little cooking."

Chipping off strips of frozen meat, he sharpened a twig and strung them upon it. These he held before the fire until they were done to a delicious brown.

"Mm!" he exulted. "Couldn't be better!

I only wish the other boys had some. Wonder just where they are now."

Had he but known it, they were camped in the other end of this willow clump, not a quarter of a mile away. Five minutes' walk down the frozen stream would have brought him to them. But they had allowed their fire to die down and had crept into their sleeping-bags. No smoke came from them to him and the smoke from his fire was blown directly away from them; so they passed the night in ignorance of their close proximity to each other. When morning came they took courses which carried them miles apart.

As for Curlie, when morning broke and he found the storm had passed, he at once made his way to the top of the hill to reconnoiter. There strange things awaited him.

As he reached the crest of the hill he beheld, apparently on the ridge just beyond, a sight which caused his pulse to quicken. He saw two dog teams moving along at a steady walk. There were seven dogs in the first team and

eight in the second. They were hitched white man fashion, two and two abreast. The sleds of the long, basket type were well loaded. Atop the first rode a powerfully built man, dressed in an Eskimo parka. On the second sled, with back to Curlie, rode another person. Dressed as this one was in an Eskimo costume, one might have said he was looking at a small Eskimo man, a woman or a girl.

"The outlaw and the Whisperer," he murmured.

Involuntarily his feet moved forward. To approach them alone would seem madness. Yet, so great was his desire to unravel their secret that beyond question he would have risked it. But a strange thing happened at that moment.

The sled party had come to the end of the ridge. They should naturally have gone gliding down the slope but, to Curlie's vast astonishment, they moved straight on into thin air.

"What" — his mouth flew open in astonishment.

The next instant he laughed.

"A mirage!"

And so it was. As he focused his eyes closely upon the scene he could detect the faint outline of the long ridge upon which the party was really traveling.

"Might be forty miles away," he told himself, "and I was going to stop them. Well, anyway," he mused, "it's a glimpse that may aid us in the future."

He set himself to studying every detail of the equipment — dogs, harnesses, sleds, clothing, everything. He even sat down on the snow and traced on an old envelope with the stub of a pencil the picture as he saw it.

Then, suddenly, the sleds dropped from view.

"Light changed or they came to the edge of the ridge," he told himself.

Left to his own thoughts, he began to doubt that this was the outlaw and his companion. There were natives in this region. These people had been dressed as natives. True, the dogs were hitched white man fashion and the sleds

were white man type, but the Eskimo had learned many things from the whites; they took pleasure in imitating this superior race of people.

"No," he said to himself, "it might not have been them. I don't really know that the Whisperer exists at all. I dont—"

He paused suddenly, to stare away to the left of him where was another stream and a second long clump of willows. The wind had dropped to a whisper. The air was keen and clear. From the midst of this clump of willows, straight up a hundred feet there rose a thin, pencil-like column of white vapor which appeared to be smoke.

"Now who," he asked himself, "can be camping down there?"

His heart beat fast. Was it Jennings and Joe? He would see.

Hurriedly, yet with utmost caution, he made his way down the hill toward that clump of willows from which the thin column continued to rise.

CHAPTER XV

CURLIE VANISHES

As soon as morning broke, Joe and Jennings were out of the tent and away to make a search for their lost comrade.

With Joe's team of four dogs and an empty sled they struck away up the hill in the direction of their old camp. They found the tattered handkerchief still fluttering in the breeze and Joe's note safe beside it.

"Not been here," said Joe. "Better drive out there in the direction he took when he went after that caribou."

Taking his team to the right of the old camp site he led them backward and forward until Ginger, the leader, suddenly pricked up his ears and whined.

"He's got the scent," said Joe. "He's on

the trail. He's a hound. Hounds are great for that. All we got to do is to follow. Ginger will find him."

Away they raced after the dogs. Ginger did not hesitate for a moment until he led them straight to the pile of snow on which Curlie had cached his caribou meat, the part he could not carry away.

"Shows he got his game," said Joe, looking with a feeling of pure joy at the pile of fresh meat.

As for the dogs, they stood on their haunches and howled with delight. Hacking off some small pieces Jennings threw one to each dog. These they swallowed at a gulp. He next piled the meat on the sled and lashed it there securely.

"Might as well take it along," he explained.

Once more Joe took the dogs in a circle that they might pick up the trail. They found it at once and went racing away. But at the crest of the second hill they paused and refused to go farther.

Urge them as he might, lead them back and

forth as he did, Joe could not get them to pick up the trail and go on.

The truth was that the trail did not go on. They had come to the spot where, after following the second caribou, Curlie had turned back. All tracks were snow blown but the scent was still there.

"Lost the trail," said Jennings after a half hour of fruitless endeavor.

"Guess so," said Joe, wrinkling his brow. "Guess the only thing we can do is to look around over the hills."

They did "look around over the hills." They searched until darkness began to fall, but discovered no trace of their missing comrade.

"Might as well go back to camp," suggested Jennings. "He may have found his way back. He — he's sure to turn up."

There was a tone in his voice which suggested that Curlie might not turn up.

Hungry and weary, they were making their way back to camp when, on reaching the end of the willow clump farthest from camp old Gin-

ger suddenly pricked up his ears and springing into the bushes attempted to drag his teammates after him.

"Hey there, you Ginger!" shouted Joe. "What you doin' there. Got a rabbit er something?"

"Might be a trail," said Jennings excitedly. "Cut him out of the team; hang on to his trace, follow him and see where he takes you."

To Joe's great astonishment the dog led him straight to a willow bush camp and the ashes of a burned-out fire.

"A camp!" he exclaimed. Then he shouted:

"Oh, Jennings! Tie up the other dogs and come in here.

"Do you think it could have been Curlie that made this camp?" he asked after the miner had looked it over.

"Might have. There's nothing to prove he did or didn't. Snow's too hard to leave footprints and there's no other sign."

"Seems queer, doesn't it? Not a hundred rods from our camp."

"Question is," said Jennings, "whoever he may be, where has he gone? If he's a stranger he may have looted our tent by now."

"That's right," said Joe, greatly disturbed. "Let's get out on the edge of the bushes and see if Ginger doesn't pick up his trail."

The old leader did pick up a trail at once. The trail led away from their camp. They were tired and hungry, but for all that, so eager were they to find some trace of Curlie and to solve this new mystery that they cached the meat in the tops of some stout willows and supperless turned their faces to the trail.

It was growing dark but since there was nothing to be done save to follow the dog leader, they marched on over hill and valley in silence.

At last they found they were approaching a second clump of willows. Involuntarily Joe reached for his rifle.

"May be camped there," he whispered. "May be all right; may not. In a wilderness like this you never can tell."

They approached the clump of bushes in

silence. It was a small clump, soon searched. It was empty. They were about to leave it in disgust when Joe suddenly exclaimed:

"Look here at this!"

He pointed at some bushes from which the leaves had been completely stripped.

"Reindeer or caribou," whispered the miner as if afraid of being overheard. Snapping on his flashlight, Joe examined the bushes and the ground.

"Believe you're right. There are his tracks. He's trampled the ground in a circle and eaten all the leaves in a circle too. How do you account for that?"

"Reindeer tied to the bushes."

"Reindeer of the man we have been following," said Joe thoughtfully.

The conclusion was so obvious that neither of them troubled to voice it. Curlie Carson had no reindeer, therefore it was evident that it had not been he whom they had been following on this new scent. Some man, who it was they could not even guess, had come to their willow

clump and had camped there all night. Before coming he had tied his reindeer to this other clump and had left him there. In the morning he had returned to the reindeer and, having untied him, had driven away. At least this was the way Joe reasoned it out in his own mind. It was probable that Jennings' conclusion was not far from the same.

"It is probable," Joe went on to assure himself, "that this fellow is some Eskimo herder, who having left his reindeer to search for other reindeer or for rabbit and ptarmigan, has been caught in the storm and been obliged to camp in our willow clump for the night."

All this fine reasoning was, as reasoning very often is, entirely wrong. But since neither Joe nor Jennings knew it to be wrong, they turned their reluctant dogs toward camp and wearily made their way back.

Joe was thoroughly downhearted. Curlie, he felt sure, had been frozen to death. There was nothing left but to go on without him, but without his genius to aid them it seemed probable

that the expedition would end in utter failure.

The message he had caught the night before had been that of the Whisperer; the one which had so fortunately wakened Curlie from what might have been a fatal sleep.

"And the Whisperer was less than forty miles away," Joe now told himself. "If Curlie had got back to camp we might by now have had our man in handcuffs. As it is, he has made another day's travel and the race is still young. But," he thought, with a feeling of determination, "with Curlie, we'd catch him yet."

CHAPTER XVI

A STRANGE STEED

As you have doubtless guessed, the camp discovered by Joe and Jennings was that made by Curlie. They had been on his trail and not on the trail of some stranger. But had they attempted to follow his trail from that last clump of willows where the reindeer had been tied they would have become more and more bewildered, and had they followed that trail all night they would have caught no glimpse of their lost companion.

That you may understand why all this is true, I must tell you what happened to Curlie after he began to approach the clump of willows from which rose the thin column of white vapor.

"Glad I've got my rifle," he told himself, as he moved in close to the willows. "You can never tell what you're coming up against."

Walking on tiptoes, he approached the end of the willow clump farthest from the column of white vapor.

"Just slip in through here and have the first look," he whispered.

Pushing aside the bushes, he disappeared behind the dead leaves. There was not a breath of wind. This made it hard. It was impossible to avoid rustling the leaves. Since there was no wind to stir up other leaves, he felt sure that his presence must be detected.

His breath came quick as he paused to listen. No sound came to him. He moved on a few paces, then suddenly he paused. Had he caught a sound? Yes, there it was, a rustling of the leaves, of branches switching together.

"What's that for?" he whispered, crouching low. "May be a signal."

For some time he did not move. When at length he ventured to go forward, it was on hands and knees. Down low there were no leaves. Traveling in this manner he made no sound.

Only once his foot touched his rifle, causing a rattling sound.

Stopping dead still, he paused with wildly beating heart to listen.

"What a fool I am," he told himself at last, "creeping up on some simple innocent people probably. But when a fellow is a hunter, he gets the habit of wanting to have the first look."

A moment later he did get the "first look." And at that instant he leaped to his feet and let out a wild shout of laughter.

The only creature to be seen in the bushes was a milk-white reindeer. This deer was hitched to a short, flat sled, such as reindeer herders use. The sled was overturned and had tangled with the willows. Because of this and because of the three inch wide rawhide strap which held him to the sled, the reindeer was unable to move from the spot.

The explanation of the column of vapor was not far to seek. It was merely the deer's breath rising straight up from the willows. Since it was intensely cold the moisture from his breath

froze at once and since there was not a breath of air stirring it could be seen mounting in air for many feet.

"Wouldn't do to get too close to an enemy on such a day," he told himself; "he'd spot you in an instant."

This knowledge was destined to prove of great value to him in the days that were to come.

"Well, now," he said, addressing the deer, "I've got you. Question is, what am I going to do with you. You're evidently a bad actor; must have run away from your master. And I never drove a reindeer in my life."

He paused in thought. The reindeer would be of service to him if he could but learn to drive him. He needed no food save that which the tundra supplied, the reindeer moss under the snow. To ride on the broad-bottomed sled in his search for his companions would be far preferable to walking; besides, it meant more speed.

"Huh!" he grunted, "try anything once.

So, you old lost ship on the Arctic desert, let's turn you over and see what you've got on you."

Grasping the sled he disentangled it enough to allow him to turn it over. The sled carried a light load, all of which was covered with a piece of canvas securely bound on by a rawhide rope. That the reindeer had traveled some distance was testified to by the fact that many holes had been torn in the canvas as the sled traveled upside-down.

"Let's see what treasure is hidden here," he said.

His fingers trembled from curiosity as he untied the rope.

To his joy he found a very good sleeping-bag of deerskin, a pair of deerskin mittens, three large frozen fish and a camp-kit consisting of knives, spoons, cups, a tinplate, matches, reindeer sinew for thread and various other odds and ends beneath the canvas.

"For all these," Curlie said, "old reindeer, I thank you. They'll come in handy when we take the trail."

He proceeded to replace all the articles and to rebind the sled.

Hardly had this been accomplished than the reindeer, who had stood all this time with head down like a tired workhorse, suddenly sprang into action. With a wild snort he cleared with one leap a low willow bush and dragging the sled after him, sprang away at a terrific speed.

Curlie had barely time to leap, stomach-down, upon the sled and to grasp the rawhide rope with both hands. He was determined not to be left behind.

Scarcely realizing that his most priceless possession, his rifle, was not on the sled, he still clung there while he was whirled along at a terrific gait.

Rocking like a rowboat in a storm the sled took the ridges of snow as a boat would the waves.

Expecting at every moment to see the sled go over and to be forced to loose his hold, Curlie lay prepared for any emergency.

But the short, broad, low-runnered sled, built

for just such an emergency as this, did not turn turtle. So, across one ridge and down it they raced, along the side of a low, receding slope, then across a valley they sped. Skirting a willow clump, they crossed a narrow stream to climb a hill again.

"Ought to let him rip and go back after my rifle," the boy told himself, but, tired as he was, hungry and sleepy too, he was still game. This beast had challenged his power of wits and endurance; he would stick to the end.

"Wonder how in time you go about it to stop 'em?"

He tried shouting, but this only served to frighten the deer into greater speed, so again he was silent.

They shot down a hill. There was danger that the sled would overtake the deer and that they would be tumbled into a heap. To prevent this he began using his foot as a brake. It worked; that gave him an idea. "Have to tire him out," he told himself. "Keep the brake on all the time. That'll help."

Digging his heel in as hard as he could, he created a great deal of friction which in time began to tell upon the reindeer. He traveled with his mouth open, and his breath began to come in hoarse pants.

"I'll get you!" Curlie triumphed. "Sorry to do it, old boy, but it seems to be the only way we can come to terms."

Slowly and yet more slowly they traveled. The reindeer had dropped almost to a walk when, with a sudden spurt, he did a peculiar thing. They were near a clump of willows. Charging straight at these, like an ostrich hiding his head in the sand, he buried himself in the rustling leaves.

"Well!" said Curlie, rising stiffly, "that's that!

"And now," he said, rubbing his eyes sleepily, "I think I'll just tie you up here and leave you to browse on these tender willow leaves while I have a bit of frozen fish. After that I'll drag the sleeping-bag into the brush for forty winks."

A half hour later two thin columns of vapor rose from the willows, one from the reindeer and one from Curlie.

"Wonder if anyone will see them?" Curlie puzzled before he fell asleep. "Well, if they do, they do. I can't help it and I'm too dead for sleep to care."

Curlie's runaway reindeer had carried him far. Hardly had he fallen asleep when two dog teams appeared over the crest of the ridge. This ridge, a mile away, looked down upon the willows from which the breath of Curlie and the reindeer arose.

The foremost of the two powerful dog teams was driven by a strongly built man who ran beside the sled. Upon the other sled rode a second individual.

"Whoa!" The weary dogs halted.

"Some one camped down there." The man spoke more to himself than to his companion. "Might mean some food." He looked to the loading of his rifle. "Might mean trouble." So he stood there, apparently undecided, while

the columns of vapor continued to rise from the willows.

Had Curlie Carson possessed a guardian spirit he would beyond doubt have whispered in his ear:

"Curlie! Curlie Carson! Awake! You are in danger!"

But since he had none, he slept peacefully on.

CHAPTER XVII

A KNOTTY PROBLEM

Joe Marion and Jennings were facing a problem. They had returned to their camp after following what they thought was the trail of some other person than Curlie. You will remember that they had discovered the marks of a reindeer which had apparently been tied in the brush. This reindeer, they had concluded, belonged to some herder who had camped in the other clump of willows for the night. It was in fact the very reindeer which Curlie had found tangled in the brush. But this they did not know. And since they did not know it they supposed they had lost all trace of their companion and were more than half convinced that he had been frozen to death in the blizzard.

Now, under the circumstances, what were they

to do? They had come a long and dangerous way to capture a man, the air outlaw. To get his man had been Curlie's constant thought. He was doubtless getting farther and farther from them as the hours passed. They now had meat to last them three or four days. What should they do? Press on as rapidly as they could, leaving Curlie to find their trail and follow if he were still alive, or should they continue the search for him, circling the hills and the tundra with the dogs in the hopes of again picking up his trail?

"Might be still alive but with frozen feet, unable to travel," suggested Joe.

"Yes, that has happened often in the Arctic!" said Jennings.

"But he has his belt radiophone set," said Joe thoughtfully. "The air is quiet now. His balloon aerial would work beautifully. Why don't —"

Suddenly he started. In his eager search for his companion he had neglected the radiophone.

Now he turned his attention to it. Tuning it

to 200, their agreed wave length, he listened in while Jennings fried caribou steak.

"That's a rare treat," said Jennings as he set his teeth in a juicy morsel. "It's surprising how you can keep a liking for caribou and reindeer meat. In '98 we came in four or five thousand strong over the trail from Valdez. We each had sixteen hundred pounds of kit and grub which cost us about four hundred dollars. With that food and the fish and game we got, we lived up here a year and a half. Think of it; a year and a half on a sled load of grub."

"Did you find much gold?" asked Joe.

"Not many of us did. Most of us went back to the States poorer than when we came. That is, we did as far as money goes, but in other ways we had gained much. We had learned how to live without the white man's luxuries. We had learned to face danger, hardship and even death with a smile. We had lived hundreds of miles from doctors, drugs and nurses, and yet most of us came out of it, brown, sturdy, hard-muscled, keen of nerve

and of mind, ready for anything that life might hand us. That's the pay men get for daring a wilderness."

"Sh—"

Joe held up a warning finger. He was getting something out of the air.

He knew at once that it was not Curlie speaking, yet he felt sure it was important. It came from the north.

"Steamship Torrentia. Munson, the explorer, speaking." Joe thrilled at the sound of that name.

"Torrentia - crushed - by ice," the voice went on. "Sinking - by - the - bow. Position - about - one - thousand - miles - due - north - of - Flaxman - Island. All supplies - unloaded - on - floating - ice pans. Shall attempt - pole - by plane. Later - return - by plane - to Flaxman. Must - have - transportation - for thirty - men from - Flaxman. Authorize - any necessary expense."

The message ended, Joe sat wrapped in deep thought.

"I don't see how he hopes to get transportation for thirty men from Flaxman Island. That spot, why that's off the map — all but off the earth. Nobody there. No one near. We can help him some with our dogs if we happen to be there when he arrives but our teams are but a sample of what he needs."

"Ought to have left dogs and a native or two with his supplies at Flaxman," said Jennings.

"Yes, but he didn't."

"No. That's the real point."

"Say!" exclaimed Joe suddenly, "there must be a reindeer herd somewhere near here, otherwise that fellow with the sled deer wouldn't be wandering around so close."

"Probably. But you can't be sure of it. Those little brown folks think a lot of their reindeer. I have known them to trail a deer that had run away in company with wild caribou, for more than five hundred miles. Anyway, it's worth looking into. If there is a good-sized herd close to us, the Eskimo who owns it will

have enough sled deers to bring Munson's whole party out to civilization. I think we ought to look into that at once."

"I'd agree with you but for one consideration," said Joe thoughtfully.

"What's that?" said Jennings sharply.

"The outlaw."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"He's going north, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Toward Flaxman Island?"

"Probably. But what of that. What little food he and his companion, if he has one, will eat, won't amount to anything."

"No, it won't; not if he stops at that. But as Curlie and I have said to you before, everything goes to indicate that he is sore at Munson; that he'd like to do him an injury. What greater injury could he do him than to load down his sled with supplies from Flaxman Island, then touch a match to the rest? Why, man, the whole thirty of them would starve just as Sir John Franklin's hundred and fifty

men did in that same region two or three generations ago!"

"Yes, if the outlaw's that kind of a bird."

"Who knows about that? The only way to find out is to go after him. I think it's mighty important that we get him and get him quick."

"Then we'll have to leave Curlie to make the best of things, to shift for himself?"

"We-l-l," said Joe, speaking very slowly, "I — I'm not sure what we should do. Let's leave that discussion until morning."

"Agreed," said Jennings as he began unlacing his felt shoes, preparatory to creeping into his sleeping-bag.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MYSTERIOUS ATTACK

After a moment of indecision the man driving the team of powerful dogs, who, as you remember, was standing looking down at the two columns of vapor which marked the spot where Curlie Carson slept, spoke to his dog team. He had been debating the advisability of descending the hill and entering that clump of willows. What he now said to his dogs was:

"You mush!"

The dogs leaped forward and, since he had given them no order as to direction, they raced away straight along the ridge and not down to the willows.

A hundred yards farther on he dug his heels in the snow as he clung to the handle of the sled and shouted: "Whoa!"

Again he appeared to debate the question. This time he was more prompt in his decision.

Again the team followed the ridge, while away in the willow clump, all unarmed and defenseless, Curlie Carson slept and his newly acquired reindeer munched on at the dead willow leaves. The deer was sleek and fat. He would have made prime feed for the traveler's dogs as well as for him and his companion. And as for Curlie; well, perhaps the man might have rejoiced at meeting him alone and unarmed. Of that we shall learn more later.

Curlie slept longer than he had intended doing. His weary brain and tired body yearned for rest and once this was offered to them they partook of it in a prodigal manner.

At last he awoke, to poke his head out of the sleeping-bag and to stare up at the stars.

"Where am I?" he asked himself. "Ah, yes, now I remember; in a clump of willows. I have a mysterious reindeer but no rifle. I have some frozen fish. This clump of willows, where is it? Where is our camp? Joe Marion, Jen-

nings, where are they? Who can tell?" He sat up and scratched his head.

"Well, I'm here. That much is good." He caught the sound of the reindeer stamping the ground. "So's the reindeer here. That is better. Only hope I learn to drive him."

He did learn to drive the reindeer and that quite speedily. He found that a long rope of rawhide was fastened to the deer's halter. This was long enough to run back to the sled. It was, he concluded, used as a jerk-line, such as was once employed by drivers of oxen.

The harness he found to be of very simple construction. Two wooden affairs fitting closely to the shoulders and tied together at top and bottom with stout rawhide thongs, served as both collar and harness. From the bottom of these ran a broad strap which connected directly with the sled. This strap was held up from the ground by a second broad strap which encircled the animal's body directly behind its forelegs.

"Now," he told the reindeer, "we're going to try it over again. We got a bad start last

time. Fact is, you were away before the starter's whistle blew.

"You see," he said, straightening out the jerk strap, "I'm going to hold on to this. If you get excited and speed up a little too much I'll pull your head over on one side and make you go in a circle. That'll slow you up. Then I'll pile off the sled and dig in my heels. That should stand you on your head. You don't weigh much; not over three or four hundred. When I've put you on your head a few times I shouldn't be surprised if you'd turn into a very good, obedient little reindeer."

It took but three try-outs to convince the reindeer that Curlie was not an ill-meaning sort of fellow but that he was one who meant to have his own way. Then, like all other creatures who have been trained, he settled down to business and carried his newly acquired master wherever he wanted to go; that is, he did up to a certain moment. After that moment things changed and Curlie was carried straight into trouble.

When he left the clump of willows Curlie drove his reindeer up the slope to the crest of the ridge. He did this that he might get a better view of the surrounding country, to determine if possible the direction in which their former camp lay.

Imagine his surprise on coming to a patch of soft, freshly blown snow at the crest of the ridge, to find the tracks of dogs and sleds.

"Fresh tracks!" he whispered breathlessly, "not ten hours old."

He bent over to study these tracks. For a moment, he examined each imprint of a dog's foot in the snow, each trace of sled runner and every footprint of the driver, then with a sudden bound he stood up again.

"It is!" he exclaimed. "It is the outlaw! Passed while I slept. Why must a fellow be everlastingly sleeping his life away?

"But then," he thought after a moment's deliberation, "perhaps it was just as well. What could I have done without help and without weapons of any kind?"

Seating himself on his sled while his reindeer pawed deep into the snow in his search for reindeer moss, he thought things through.

"Joe Marion and Jennings," he told himself, "will sooner or later give up their search for me and will get back on the outlaw's trail. They realize the importance of capturing him. They are brave fellows. They will not hesitate to undertake it without me. The surest way to get in with them again is to stay on this trail. Only question is, shall I turn back to meet them, shall I camp right here, or shall I follow up the outlaw at once?"

After some deliberation he concluded that going back over the trail would be risky; he might miss his companions. They might get back on the outlaw's trail after he had passed the spot on which they entered the trail. Remaining inactive did not suit him; he was not that kind of a boy.

"I'll follow the outlaw," he told himself. "I believe I've got a speedier outfit than he has. White men seldom drive reindeer, so the out-

law won't suspect me even though he sees me at a distance. I can shadow him and, even unarmed as I am, may be able to prevent a disaster."

Having come to this conclusion he led his reindeer to the crest of the ridge, faced him north, leaped upon the sled, slapped him on the hip with the jerk rein and was away.

For ten miles to the crack-crack of the reindeer's hoofs, he shot away over the snow. As the keen air cut his check, as the low, flat sled bobbed and bumped beneath him, Curlie thought he had never known another such mode of travel. Surely a reindeer, when well broken, was the ideal steed of the Arctic.

"And the beauty of it is," he told himself, "you don't have to go hunting out feed for him when the day is done. He finds it for himself under the snow. You—

"Hey, there!" he exclaimed suddenly. "What you doing?"

The reindeer had suddenly paused in his flight to sniff the air. The next instant he had

gone plunging down the snow-covered ridge.

This was no time to think of stopping or turning him. Should either be accomplished, Curlie and his sled would have gone spinning in a circle, at last to go rolling over and over in the snow, in which event Curlie would beyond doubt find himself at the foot of the ridge, very much bruised and minus both sled and reindeer.

The most he could do was to hold back the sled with his foot to prevent its overtaking his mad steed, and to allow the deer to continue in his wild race.

The ridge here was long and steep. A half mile away it ended in a forest of scrub spruce trees which beyond doubt lined the bank of a stream.

But what was this he saw as they neared the dwarf forest?

"A herd of reindeer!" he murmured in astonishment. "Five hundred or a thousand of them. Old Whitie, my friend here, smelled them and yearned for company. So he —"

What was that? From the edge of the

forest there leaped a tongue of fire, a rifle cracked, a bullet sang over his head, then another and another.

"Say! Do they think I'm a reindeer rustler?" he groaned. "Want to kill me?"

Instantly he dropped from the sled to hide behind a snow bank.

"Not much use," he told himself, "but it'll give a fellow time to think? Maybe those fellows are rustlers themselves and they think I'm an officer or something." His blood ran cold at the thought.

CHAPTER XIX

SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT

Much as they regretted it, Joe Marion and Jennings after a night's sleep were forced to admit that it seemed their duty to push on over the trail left by the outlaw.

"'Twouldn't be so bad if we hadn't caught Munson's message," said Joe thoughtfully. "In a case like this, one is obliged to consider the highest good to the greatest number. It might easily happen that a delay on our part at this moment would mean the loss of Munson's entire party. It would almost surely mean that if they arrived at Flaxman Island to find their supply depot in ashes."

"And as for Curlie," added Jennings, "if he came out of that blizzard alive with his rifle in hand, he'll take care of himself, trust him for that."

"Yes, and with that hind-quarter of caribou meat."

So it was decided that they should press on. They had followed the trail of the outlaw for ten miles or more when they came upon foot-prints in the snow beside the trail which seemed to indicate that the outlaw had paused in his travel.

"Wonder what he stopped there for?" said Jennings, examining the tracks carefully. "From the position of his feet I'd say he'd been looking down the hill."

"Aw, c'mon," said Joe. "The big point is, he went straight on and we're following."

A hundred yards farther on they came to a place where a reindeer and sled joined the trail.

"That's queer!" said Jennings, pausing again. "Funny that fellow would follow the outlaw. Looks exactly like the track made by that other fellow when he pulled out of that clump of willows after he'd left his deer tied there all night and had camped in our thicket.

Wonder if it could have been the same man."

He would have wondered still more had he known that his companion, Curlie, was on that sled and that each mile he traveled brought him closer to the curly-haired young radiophone expert.

His wonder did grow apace when, mile after mile, the reindeer driver followed the trail of the outlaw.

"Wonder what he's after," he mumbled over and over.

When presently he saw the reindeer tracks suddenly swing to the right and down the ridge, and by straining his eyes he made out a large herd of reindeer feeding at the edge of the scrub forest, he was truly disappointed.

"Thought it meant something," he grumbled, "his following along that way. But I guess he was just following the ridge for good going till he got to his reindeer herd. We might go down and buy some reindeer meat. I think I see a cabin at the edge of the forest. They might have other things to eat, coffee, hardtack and

the like. Natives often do."

"Can't afford to use up the time," said Joe. "We're doing well enough on caribou meat. Got quite a supply of it yet. So we'd better mush along. All right, Ginger! Let's go," he shouted. His leader leaped to his feet and they were away.

It would be interesting to speculate on just what would have happened had they decided to descend the hill to trade with the natives. They might have been ambushed and slain, for Curlie Carson was at that moment in the cabin at the edge of the forest and he was far from free to go his own way.

So like ships in the night they passed, Curlie Carson and his pals. Only once Jennings paused to look back. Then as he shaded his eyes he said to Joe:

"Seems like I see something hovering up there about the tree tops."

"White owl or raven," said Joe.

"No, I don't think it is. Can't quite make out what it is, though."

Then they pressed on over the trail left by the sleds of the outlaw.

The fluttering above the edge of the forest was caused by neither white owl nor raven, but by three balloons bobbing about in the air; a red one, a white one and a blue one. These balloons, considerably larger than toy balloons, were kept from fluttering away by silk cords reaching to the cabin below.

Before we can explain their presence here we must first tell what had happened to Curlie Carson since we left him huddled behind a snowbank with bullets singing over him.

Without knowing why he had been attacked Curlie realized that he was in grave danger. These rough men, whoever they might be, were apparently bent on his destruction.

For the moment he was safe. The snowbank was thick and solid. A bullet, he knew, made little progress in snow. But they might outflank him and come in to the right or left of him. They doubtless believed him to be in possession of a rifle, or at least an automatic.

They would plan their attack with extreme caution but in time they would get him.

Twisting about under cover he studied the lie of the snow to right and left of him. It was not reassuring. True, there were other snow ridges, but to reach these he must expose himself. This would not do. To cut himself a trench along the hillside would take too long. Besides he would be detected in the attempt. He thought of his belt radiophone equipment.

"Might get up a balloon aerial," he told himself, "and send an S. O. S. But that would take time — too much time. Besides, who'd come to my rescue? Deuce of a mess, I'd say!"

He at length determined on a bold move.

"Might get shot down on the spot," he admitted, "but it's better than waiting."

The thing he did was to leap suddenly upon the crest of the snowbank with his hands held high in air, at the same time keeping a sharp eye on the attackers. If they shot he would instantly drop back.

They did not shoot. Their rifles went to their

shoulders but when they saw his hands in air they hesitated.

After a brief consultation, two of them, with rifles extended before them for a hip-shot, walked slowly toward him.

When they were within twenty yards of him Curlie said in the calmest tone he could command:

"What's the matter with you fellows? I didn't steal your reindeer. Found him tangled in a thicket where he would have starved. Besides, I have no guns. What harm could I do you?"

Without a word the two men proceeded to advance. As they came closer Curlie became convinced that they were Indians and not Eskimos as he had supposed them to be.

"That makes it look different," he told himself. "They may be reindeer rustlers who have stolen the reindeer herd. Probably are. Never heard of a reindeer herd being given to Indians. Might have, for all that. Or they may be just herding them for some white men."

As the two men came up to him one man felt of his clothing for concealed weapons. After this, with a grunt, he pointed toward the cabin, then led the way, leaving his companion to bring up the rear.

Arrived at the edge of the forest, the foremost man joined the man who had remained behind. After a short consultation in tones too low to be understood, he returned to Curlie and again motioning him to follow, led him to a low log cabin.

Once inside this cabin, he pushed Curlie into a small dark room, after which he swung to a heavy door and dropped a ponderous bar.

"Well now, what about that?" Curlie whispered to himself.

A hasty survey of his prison revealed a chair and a rough bed made of poles on which there rested some filthy blankets. The place was lighted by two windows, not more than ten inches square. The walls were of heavy logs.

"I wonder who they are and who they think I am," he asked himself.

He sat down to think and as he did so his arm brushed his belt. At that moment an inspiration came to him.

"Worth trying anyway," he whispered as he rose hastily. "Have to be quick about it though. Lucky that window's at the back of the cabin."

CHAPTER XX

"WE HAVE MET WITH DISASTER"

Curlie's fingers, working rapidly yet with trained precision, drew various articles from his belt. A coil of fine wire, two long spools made of some black substance, a pocket spirit lamp, a miniature metal retort, three small balloons made of a specially prepared elastic fiber; all these and many more things appeared as if by magic, and were spread out upon a blanket on the cot.

After unwinding and winding again some yards of fine copper wire, he snapped open the metal-cased spirit lamp and a tiny flame appeared. Attaching a balloon to the retort he applied the flame to the body of the retort. At once the balloon began to expand. Chemicals already in the retort were assuming a gaseous form.

Just here he found himself facing a diffi-

culty; the balloons were going to expand to a size beyond that of the windows. With lightning-like decision he climbed upon a chair and thrust balloon, retort, spirit lamp and all out of the window. There he held them all at arm's length.

"Might be seen, but I can't help it," he muttered.

The balloon was tugging at his hand. When the tug had grown strong he snapped on a rubber band, withdrew the retort, tied the balloon to a round of the chair and was at once busy with a second balloon.

When all three balloons were bobbing about outside the window he breathed a sigh of relief.

Attaching a spool of fine wire to a silk cord which was tied to all three balloons, he allowed the balloons to rise while he played out two strands of wire. Having reached the second spool he allowed the fine copper wire aerial which he had thus made to rise with the balloons until they had reached a height of three hundred feet.

A fine, insulated copper wire ran from the aerial to the ground. This he attached to an instrument in his belt. Having tuned in on 200 he sat down calmly to repeat in a low tone at regular intervals:

" S. O. S. — S. O. S. — S. O. S."

It was the only way he had been able to think of for letting the world know he was in trouble.

It brought results, for soon to his waiting ears came a gruff grumble which resembled the growl of a bear disturbed from his slumber:

" Hey! What's the rumpus? What do you want? "

" Who are you? " Curlie whispered back.

" Deputy Marshal McDonald of the U. S. Station at Sinizols. Who the blazes are you? "

Slowly, distinctly, in a tense whisper Curlie told of his predicament.

" I know 'em," came in a roar through the air. " They stole those deer. Don't let 'em know you know. When they come in let 'em listen to me. Tell 'em who I am. They know me. That'll settle 'em. Tell 'em I'll follow 'em

to the Pole if they don't let you go. No — don't tell 'em. Let me. They don't know about radiophones. Just got mine last week. They're superstitious. It'll knock 'em dead. Let me tell 'em."

"All right," whispered Curlie, "keep your batteries connected and stand by. I'll see what I can find out.

"Nothing like the little old radio," he told himself; "nothing at all like it when you're in a peck of trouble."

Hanging his receiver on a nail he turned toward the door. Placing his ear against a crack, he listened.

To his surprise, he found that the men were speaking English. "One of them is a half-breed, maybe of another tribe, and doesn't understand the native language of the others," was his mental comment.

As he now and then caught a snatch of the conversation, his blood ran cold. There could be no mistaking the subject of their debate. They were discussing the question of whether

or not, he, Curlie, should be killed. The half-breed was standing out against it, while the others insisted that it was the only safe thing to do. So determined were they about it and so earnest in their debate that at times their voices rose almost to a shout.

"If you were to consult me in the matter," Curlie whispered to himself, "I would most certainly agree with my old friend, the half-breed."

Even as he joked with himself, the true significance of his situation was borne more closely in upon him. Here he was many miles from human habitation in the heart of a wilderness. Three men calmly debated his destruction. Two against one; there could be no question of the verdict.

Escape was impossible. The windows were too small. The men were powerfully built; there was no chance to fight his way to freedom.

There stood between him and death a slender wire reaching up to two yet more slender ones hanging in the sky. What if the gas escaped

from the balloons? What if a sudden gust of wind sent them crashing down into the treetops to tear and tangle his slender aerials? What if the deputy at the other end should make some mistake and be unable to listen in?

Little wonder that, as he stood there listening, waiting, his face turned gray with anxiety and fear.

In the meantime an important message had come to Joe and Jennings as they listened in on long wave lengths from their camp some ten miles from the cabin. The message was from the explorer, Munson.

"Munson's Expedition - Munson - speaking," came the voice from the air. "We - have met - with disaster. Dash to - Pole - abandoned. Ice - began - piling - at - four - this morning. Many supplies - much - gasoline - lost. Will - not - have - enough - gasoline - to - bring - planes - to - land. One - plane - smashed. Cannot - bring - food - only - men. If - supporting - party - can be - sent - from - due - north - of - Flaxman - Island - it - may save - our lives."

Joe Marion listened to the message as it was repeated three times, then turned a grave face to Jennings.

" That's serious," he said after he had repeated the message. " I might answer it but what could I promise him? "

" You'd only give our position away to the outlaw."

" I might try to relay the message to others who might help."

" There's no one near enough."

" Then the only thing we can do is to try to reach them with such supplies as we can carry."

" Looks that way just now," said Jennings, wrinkling his brow. " We might think of something later. How about the outlaw? Do we get him first? "

" That's the question. We'll have to wait and see. May get another message later. In the meantime, let's turn in early and get a start tomorrow before daybreak. The importance of our mission to the north has been greatly increased."

CHAPTER XXI

A TENSE SITUATION

If Curlie's knees trembled as he heard the heavy bar being lifted from the door, there was no trace of emotion on his face when at last the door swung open and he stood facing his three captors.

"Welcome in," he smiled, coolly. "I was just thinking of calling you.

"You see," he explained, "I've just been talking to your old friend McGregor of the U. S. Service."

The men started back to stare about the small room, as if suspecting that the deputy was hidden somewhere within.

"He's not here," smiled Curlie, who in spite of the grave danger which confronted him was enjoying the situation. "I was just speaking to him over the phone."

"Phone!" The half-breed whispered the words.

It was evident that the trio were more bewildered than before. They had seen telephones and telephone wires in centers of civilization which they had visited. They knew what they were; knew, too, that there was not a yard of telephone wire within three hundred miles of their cabin. As for a telephone, had they not built this cabin? How then could it contain a telephone without their knowing it?

"Huh!" grunted the older of the two Indians. He uttered a low laugh of contempt which showed plainer than words that he thought Curlie was bluffing.

Curlie's hand went to his side. He lifted a transmitter to his lips, then touched a button at his belt.

"Are you there, McGregor?" He pronounced the words distinctly.

It was one of those periods of time in which one lives a year in the space of a moment, a moment tense with terrible possibilities.

Into Curlie's mind there flashed a score of questions. Was McGregor there? Would he respond? Would the Indians be frightened to the point of giving him up if he did? Was the slender aerial still dangling in air and still working? These and many others sped through his active brain as breathlessly he waited.

Then, suddenly, with a fervently whispered, "Thank God!" he caught McGregor's gruff voice:

"Aye, here! Let me have 'em. Put 'em on."

The older Indian was so surprised by Curlie's actions that the receiver was on his head before he knew it.

The next instant his mouth sagged open, his eyes bulged out, his knees scarcely supported him. He was hearing McGregor's voice. He did not know how nor why, but he heard. It was enough. He was afraid.

For three minutes they all stood there spellbound. Then apparently the voice ceased.

"Wha — what do you want?" the Indian quavered.

"Only my reindeer, my sled and a chance to get away from here," smiled Curlie.

"Boz Peon, go get 'em." The Indian spoke to the half-breed. At once he was away.

"All right, McGregor," Curlie breathed into the transmitter. "Thanks a lot. Hope I meet you sometime. If there's anything further you'll get my S. O. S."

Turning to the window, he began hauling in on the wire and silk cord. Just as the reindeer arrived at the door, he replaced in his belt the last bit of apparatus.

"All O. K. for next time," he whispered to himself. "Trust the old radiophone to pull you through."

After leaving the cabin he was obliged to lead his reindeer for the first two or three miles. Had he not done this the deer might have rebelled again and gone racing back.

"Wish I'd insisted on their giving me a rifle," he told himself. "Wish there was some way of getting that reindeer herd from them," he thought a few moments later. "It's a shame

that they should rob the Eskimo that way. The reindeer are everything to the Eskimo, food, clothing, bedding and means of travel. It's a crime to rob them. Of course the rascals will be caught and punished, but by that time the splendid herd may be scattered to the four winds."

Little did he guess the strange circumstances under which he would see that herd again, nor of the ways in which the herd would assist him in carrying out the purposes which were already forming in his mind.

An exclamation of joy escaped his lips as he swung back on the trail running along the ridge.

"They're after the outlaw! Good old Jennings and Joe! We'll get him yet. I'll catch up with them! Hooray!" He threw his hands in the air and gave such a lusty shout that the reindeer came near leaping out of his harness.

He had discovered that while he was being held prisoner by the Indians, Joe and Jennings

in their pursuit of the outlaw had passed him.

"All I've got to do," he told himself, "is to speed up this old white ship of the Arctic desert and I'll be with them in twenty-four hours."

In this he was mistaken, but since he did not know it he went bumping merrily along over the ridges. Now and then shouting at his reindeer, now and then bursting forth into snatches of boisterous song, he appeared filled with quite as much joy as a boy off for a fishing trip.

So, for hours he traveled, until his reindeer was in need of rest and food, then he turned off into the edge of the scrub-spruce forest. Here, after tethering the deer in an open spot where there was much moss, he built himself a rude shelter of green boughs, kindled a fire, roasted some strips of reindeer meat procured from the Indians, then crept into his sleeping-bag.

Here for a time, through a crack in his green canopy, he watched the big dipper in its wide circle about the north star, which blinked down from nearly straight above him. He at last fell asleep.

In the meantime, in a camp some distance farther down the valley, beneath a cut-bank at the edge of a frozen river, his two companions were receiving a strange and startling message. The message was once more from Munson, the explorer. Again the expedition had met with disaster. Having attempted the flight to shore in their airplanes they had made but half the distance when one of the planes became disabled and landed, to crash into a pile of ice. With the remaining planes much overloaded, they had been obliged to abandon all food. Two hundred miles from shore the gasoline had given out. Making fortunate landings on broad ice-pans, they had at once started on foot for shore. They had been carried to the right by a strong gale and would doubtless reach land some twenty miles west of their food depot on Flaxman Island; that is, they would land there if anywhere. Without food they were well nigh hopeless. Still they had two light rifles and a hundred rounds of ammunition. There were seals in water-holes and polar bears wandering

over the floes. There was a chance for life. If anyone listening in on this message were in a position to come out and meet them they might be the instruments in saving lives.

"That means us," said Joe. "And it means such a struggle as we have never experienced before."

"Means we leave the trail of the outlaw at once," said Jennings.

"Why — uh — " Joe stammered.

"His trail will lead us twenty miles out of the way. Flaxman Island is twenty miles to the east of us; these explorers are straight ahead. We follow this stream straight to the sea. Hard-packed river trail all the way. The outlaw, unless I miss my guess, will turn off soon to cut across the hills."

"We haven't much food to take to them."

"We have our dogs," said Jennings grimly. "Men eat dogs when they are starving."

Joe looked at his old leader, Ginger, who lay with feet stretched out before the fire. The dog rose, stretched himself, then walked over to

rub his cold nose against his young master.

Joe gulped, "Y-e-s, I suppose they do."

"We'll unload everything we don't need, all the radiophone equipment except the light set, and cache them here. Then we'll make a flying trip of it. And," he said, noting Joe's discomfort at the thought of sacrificing his faithful four, the team that had fought with him, starved with him and carried him so far, "we've got rifles and ammunition. Who knows what game may bob up to take the place of our dogs?"

CHAPTER XXII

A MAD DREAM

It was with a feeling of great astonishment that Curlie, early in the afternoon of the next short Arctic day, came upon the pile of radiophone instruments and other articles which had been piled beside the trail by his companions.

"Now what does this mean?" he said, addressing his reindeer. "Can't be they've been ambushed and robbed. Things are piled away too carefully for that."

"Hello!" he exclaimed a moment later, "they've left the trail of the outlaw! Of all the unbelievable things! What could have induced them to do that? Can't be trying to outflank him. Trail they've taken is a lot longer than his."

He returned to sit down on the sled and scratch his head.

"Traveling light, they are. I'd never catch them now."

Again he was silent for some time.

"Wish they'd left me a rifle. I'd go after the outlaw single-handed. But of course they wouldn't. Don't even know I'm alive, let alone on their trail with a reindeer. Nothing more improbable than that. Wish I'd risked a call to them. Didn't dare, though. Outlaw'd know we were after him if he listened in. Now what's to be done? Have to see how much radiophone stuff they left behind."

For some time he busied himself sorting out the parts of the heavier radiophone set and connecting them up.

"All here," he breathed at last, "even my little outfit for making mince pie of a fellow's speech then piecing it together again. Joe took all the smaller set, though. That's good. Best thing I can do is to camp right here and wait until I'm sure they must be camped for the night. Then I'll send out a signal and see if I can get them. I can talk mince meat fashion

so the outlaw won't know what it's about, anyway. Got to get in touch with them some way or another."

Realizing that after hearing from them he might want to travel at night to make up for lost time, after tethering out his reindeer he crept into his sleeping-bag and, in a moment, fell into a sound sleep.

When he awoke it was quite dark. Getting busy at once with his radiophone, he sent a signal quivering through the air.

He received no response.

A half hour later he sent out a second. Still no answer.

"That's queer! Mighty queer," he murmured. "Still, they may have made rapid time and got in ahead of the outlaw. May be close in, too close to risk an answer. No harm to keep on trying, though."

It will be remembered that Curlie had not listened in on any of the messages sent by the exploring party. As a consequence he was totally ignorant of their plight and unable in any

way to account for his companions' sudden change of course.

"Queer business!" he told himself as he prepared to send his third signal. "Mighty queer!"

Every half hour for three hours he sent out the signal. Then, just as he was about to give it up, his receiver rattled and a succession of short, sharp, meaningless sounds began to pour forth.

"That's Joe!" he smiled delightedly. "Nobody up here can talk that language. Now we'll know what's what."

His conclusion was correct. It was Joe speaking. When Curlie had decoded the jumbled message he needed only to signal back an answering O. K. In short, concise sentences, Joe had told him all that he needed to know.

"And now," he sat down rather dizzily on his sled, "where does that leave me? Far as I can see, it leaves me guardian of that food supply until the party gets in. It's the best I can do. And, unless I miss my guess, it's going

to be some job! I'm to be a guard without a gun. And the fellow I'm going up against has a gun, probably two or three of them."

After a few moments had elapsed, he spoke again: "Short day's journey now. No use risking coming upon him in the night. Might as well take another snooze and freshen up a bit."

At that he crept into his sleeping-bag once more, but not to sleep at once. His mind was too full of thoughts for that. The curtain to the crowded third act of this little drama of life which he had been playing was, he felt sure, about to rise. What was it to be like? What gun-play, what struggles, what battle of wits would be enacted upon that white and glistening stage with no audience save the stars?

His mind was filled with a thousand questions. Who was the outlaw? Was he the smuggler chieftain or was he not? What grudge did he hold against the great explorer that he would travel all this distance to satisfy it? Or did he hold a grudge at all? Was he merely

coming here to winter in safety? Would he camp by the food depot or would he destroy it? Who was his companion? Or did he have no companion? Had it been he who had appeared in the mirage or had it not?

Who was the Whisperer? Or was there no Whisperer? If there was such a person, was that person a girl and was she with the outlaw at the present time? If he succeeded in outwitting the outlaw, would he at last meet the Whisperer face to face?

All these and many more questions seething through his brain, kept him for a long time awake. But at last weariness conquered and he fell asleep.

When, only a few hours later, he awoke, it was with a feeling of impending danger. Before he opened his eyes, he could hear the reindeer thrashing about among the willows to which he was tied in a vain attempt to break away. When he opened his eyes it was to stare up at a broad dome of sky which appeared to be all on fire.

"The food depot!" he groaned, leaping to his feet. "It was closer than I thought. It's gone. Burned!"

"No!" he exclaimed, a second later. "No, it's worse than that!" He put his hand to his forehead. The next instant, reeling like a drunken man in a delirious dream, he stumbled toward his reindeer.

CHAPTER XXIII

"A BEAR! A BEAR!"

In the meantime Joe Marion and Jennings were making their way over the treacherous ice floe toward the party of explorers who were battling for their lives against cold, hunger and ever perilous floes.

They had crossed a broad expanse of ice which, level as a floor, lay between the shore and a series of low, barren, sandy islands. Then for three miles farther they had traveled over ice which was frozen to the shore. This ice, piled as it had been by storms of early winter into fantastic heaps, here and there mixed with flat cakes and with narrow, tombstone-like fragments set on end, was nevertheless firmly united to the shore. Over this, winding back and forth on flat cakes and over tumbled piles of ice, they traveled without fear.

When they came to what lay beyond this, all was changed. They entered upon a new life with fear and trembling. True, the ice, pressed hard on shore by a north wind, was not at this moment moving, yet the slow rising and falling of a broad cake of ice here, the crumbling of a pile there, told them that they were now far out over the fathomless ocean; told them too that should the wind shift to south, east or west they might at any moment be carried out to sea, never to be heard of again.

"Can't be helped," Jennings said grimly, as Joe spoke of this. "When the lives of thirty of Uncle Sam's brave citizens are at stake one does not think of personal danger. He goes straight ahead and does his duty. Our duty lies out there." He pointed straight over the ice floes which lay far as eye could scan, out to sea.

"Right-o," said Joe as he turned to urge his dogs forward.

It was hard on Joe, this urging of his faithful four forward over the difficult trail.

"'Twouldn't be so bad," he told them, "if I wasn't driving you straight on to your own destruction. To think that after all this struggle your reward is being eaten by some starving explorers. That's what breaks my heart."

"Ho, well," he sighed as he climbed a tumbled pile of ice fragments, "there may be a way out yet."

Night came on, and still by the light of the moon they fought their way forward. Every moment counted. Their own lives as well as the lives of those they sought to rescue were at stake.

Only when the dogs, completely exhausted, lay down in the traces and howled piteously, begging for rest and food, did they pause and seek a camping place for the night.

A broad cake of ice some hundred yards wide from edge to edge was chosen. In the center of this they pitched their tent. No Arctic feathers for them that night, only the hard surface of the ice. But even such a bed as this was welcome after a day of heroic toil.

When the dogs had been fed and they had eaten their own supper they set up the radiophone, and braving the danger of being detected by the outlaw, sought to get into communication with the exploring party.

"Got to find out whether we are going right," Joe explained.

In a surprisingly short time they received an answer and were cheered by the news that their course was correct, and that they were at this moment not more than seventy-five miles from the explorers. With good luck, did not the ice floe begin to shift, they might almost hope to meet the men they sought at the evening of the next day and to relieve them of their suffering from hunger.

After getting in touch with Curlie and rejoicing over the knowledge that he was alive and safe, they crept into their sleeping-bags and speedily drifted away to the land of dreams.

Joe was awakened some time later to hear old Major sawing at the chain which bound him to his sled and barking lustily.

Before his eyes were fully open he heard a ripping sound at the flaps of the tent. The next instant two great round balls of fire appeared at the gap made in the tent-wall.

"Jennings! Jennings!" he shouted hoarsely. "A bear! A bear!"

The polar bear, attracted by the sound of his voice, lunged forward, taking half the tent with him.

Joe had scarcely time to creep back into the depths of his sleeping bag when the bear's foot came down with a thud exactly where his head had been a second before.

* * * * * * *

What Curlie Carson saw as he plunged toward his reindeer there at the edge of the scrub forest was a spectacle which might well have staggered a person much older than himself.

The forest of scrub spruce was on fire. The fire was traveling toward him, seemed, indeed, to be all but upon him.

There was not a breath of air. The fire traveled by leaping from tree to tree. The

very heat of it appeared to seize the dwarf trees and, uprooting them, to hurl them hundreds of feet in air.

It was such a spectacle as few are called upon to witness. A red column of flame rose a sheer hundred feet in air. Dry, rosiny spruce cones and needles rose like feathers high in air, to go rocketing away like sparks from a volcano. The sky, the very snow all about him, seemed on fire.

"And near! So near!" he muttered through parched lips as he tore at the thong which bound his terrified reindeer to the willow bush.

His thought had been to loose the reindeer, and clinging to the sled, attempt to escape.

It was fortunate that the thong resisted his efforts, for just as he was about to succeed in loosing it, he caught above the tremendous roar of the fire a strange crack-cracking. The next instant he saw a vast herd of wild and half tame things, all maddened by the fire, bearing down upon him. There was just time to flash his knife twice, to cut the thong and the sled

strap, then to leap astride the white reindeer. Then the surge were upon him. Like a mighty flood they surrounded him, engulfed him, carried him forward.

He saw them as in a dream, reindeer by hundred, caribou by thousands, wolves, a bear, all struggling in a mad effort to rush down the narrow valley from the destroying pillar of fire.

He saw a wolf snap at a caribou's heels. Saw innumerable hoofs strike the wolf and bear him down to sure destruction.

"Trampled him to death," he shivered, "trampled him as they would me if I fell from my reindeer."

He clung to the deer's neck and to his harness with the grim grip of death.

"Sled's gone, radiophone set gone. Everything gone but life and a reindeer. And thus far you are lucky." So his mind seemed to tell him things as he felt himself floating forward as if on the backs of the innumerable host.

CHAPTER XXIV

A WILD MIX-UP

Just when Joe, trapped in the sleeping-bag, with the ponderous bear moving near him, was wondering what had happened to Jennings, he felt himself suddenly lifted from the ice and shaken till his teeth rattled. Then suddenly he went crashing upon the hard surface beneath him.

He guessed well enough what had happened: The bear had seized the sleeping-bag and having lifted it as a cat lifts a rat, had shaken it violently. Then the deerskin had given way beneath Joe's weight and he had gone down with a thump.

"What next?" his agitated mind asked him. "What next?"

He could only guess at what happened next. Inside his sleeping-bag he could see nothing.

But that something tremendous was happening he was forced to believe.

From the mouth of the bear there came a sudden sound like the hissing of a cat, and after that such a tumbling and thrashing as he had never heard tell of.

Over and over the bear appeared to roll. There were sounds of tearing canvas and straining ropes. Once the bear rolled across his feet and for a second he feared he would be lamed for life. Then suddenly the sound ceased. He only knew one thing, which was that something heavy rested on his sleeping-bag.

To realize what had really happened we must follow Jennings as he proceeded to meet this strange and novel situation. Being more fortunate than Joe, he had succeeded in wriggling from his sleeping-bag and in grasping his rifle before the bear saw him. He had been engaged in the business of getting a bead on the bear's ponderous head when there came a sudden tearing at the ropes of the tent. The next instant it doubled up and came flapping down upon him.

If you are able to imagine what it might be like to be caught in a net with a whale, you have some notion of Jennings' position at this time. The tent had enveloped both him and the bear. Together they rolled over and over. One moment it seemed he would be crushed to death and the next, as an opening appeared, a new rent in the canvas, it seemed that he might be freed.

At last, with a mighty effort, he wrenched himself loose and, much to his own astonishment, found that he still grasped his rifle in his left hand.

The bear was still thrashing about. Joe was still buried beneath the tent. Jennings was just trying to figure out the next move, when he heard one of the dogs let out a wild ki-yi-yi of fright.

Wheeling about, he saw a huge bear grasping a dog by the middle of the back with his teeth and attempting to carry him away. Since the dog was chained to a sled and six other dogs were also chained to that sled, it was necessary

for him to drag the sled and six very reluctant dogs after him.

"Be funny if it wasn't serious," said Jennings grimly as he took steady aim at the beast's head. Three times his automatic rifle barked. The bear crumpled up in a heap.

There was, however, not a second to be wasted. As he turned he found himself staring at a towering white apparition. This apparition, which stood some three feet above his head, had red gleaming eyes and a lolling tongue. The second bear had escaped from the tent. Angered by his experience and the death of his companion, he was ready for battle with these strange invaders of his domain.

"Want satisfaction, do you?" said Jennings grimly. "Well! There! Take it!"

With a movement that for speed and accuracy could not be beaten, he thrust the muzzle of his rifle at the base of the beast's skull and fired.

Thus a second bear had just been bagged by Jennings when Joe came creeping out of his sleeping-bag. For a few seconds he sat rubbing

his shins. Then suddenly his face lightened with a smile as he sang out:

"We killed the bear! Betsy and I killed the bear."

"Well, anyway," smiled Jennings, "you're going to have one of your dearest wishes granted. Your old dorgs, Ginger, Pete, Major and Bones, won't have to be fed to the starvin' explorers. Here's a day's rations for a regiment of soldiers. I bet that big bear weighs a ton and a half."

"Whoop-ee!" cried Joe springing to his feet and rushing over to embrace his astonished friend, Ginger. "That's sure good news to us!"

"Sixteen inches between the ears," pronounced Jennings after measuring with his hands the skull of the fallen Goliath of the North. "Some bear!"

"Some bear, I'd say!" echoed Joe.

"There's a day's work to be done on the tent," said Jennings. "He ripped it up something awful. But we'll have to make it do at least till we meet Munson."

"Yes, and till we get ashore."

"Guess so. Lend a hand and let's see what shift we can make for a wink more of sleep before we march on."

In a few moments Joe and Jennings were curled up in their sleeping-bags, snoring as if they were safe in bed at home.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WILD STAMPEDE

At no time in Curlie Carson's adventurous life had he experienced such strangely mingled emotions as he did while riding astride the white reindeer in the midst of the wild stampede. A sea of tossing antlers was all about him. Behind him was the red glare of a mountain of flame. What the next moment would bring forth he could not even guess. Now the mass of struggling life was crowded into a narrow runway between banks of a river and now they spread out over an open flat. Now his legs were pinched and bruised by antlers pressed against them, and now he rode almost alone. But always his white steed plunged on into the night made light as day by the great conflagration.

"Our hope is in the open tundra, open, treeless tundra," he told himself over and over.

The great horde of creatures, seeming to know this by instinct, headed straight for it. Now he could see the tundra's broad, white expanse gleaming before them. Would they make it? The fire was gaining upon them. He felt the hot breath of flame upon his cheek. The crowding from behind became all but unbearable. Beside him, mouth open, panting, raced a monstrous caribou. Before him crashed a spotted reindeer.

Would they make it? Now they were a half mile from safety, now a quarter. The smell of burning hair came stiflingly from the rear.

And now the foremost of the pack reached the open tundra. Then, like a swollen stream which has suddenly broken through its barriers, they spread out, racing still, over the silent glistening expanse of white prairie-like tundra. "A few of the weaker ones have perished. The great mass of this wild life is saved," was Curlie's mental comment.

A mile from the flames Curlie dropped stiffly from his place on the reindeer's back and, patting his head in grateful appreciation, tied him with a loose rope to a willow bush.

"There," he murmured, "feed up a bit."

The reindeer began digging in the snow for moss, while Curlie climbed a near-by knoll to have a look at the strange spectacle.

As each wild creature pursued his own course, Curlie looked on with interest. The wolves were the first to slink away. The bear, a huge barren-ground grizzly, climbed a distant hill, there to suck his sore paws and nurse his grievances.

The caribou began passing to right and left like some army ordered to deploy and, in an astonishingly brief space of time, had all disappeared.

Only the reindeer, five hundred to a thousand in number, remained to feed peacefully upon the moss of the tundra.

"Well," Curlie said to himself, "it seems I've come into possession of a reindeer herd!

Don't see's they have any masters. No men in sight."

Just then a dog barked. It was answered by a second one.

"Dogs!" he exclaimed. "Two of them. That's interesting. Wonder what kind."

Putting two fingers to his lips, he sent out a shrill whistle. A moment later two beautiful collies came racing up to him.

"Collies!" he cried in great joy, "reindeer collies. Why, here I am all set up in business, with a herd of reindeer and collies to help herd them."

He sat down to think. This was undoubtedly the herd which had been held by the Indians. Had the fire caught them unawares and had they been burned alive? Or had they set the fire in the hope of concealing their theft of the reindeer?

"If they're still alive and did not set the fire," he told himself, "they'll be along after the fire dies down and there'll be more trouble. On the other hand, if I could take some of these

deer out upon the ice floe to meet Joe and the explorers, it would be a great boon to them. Plenty of meat, the right kind too. It might save their lives.

"But there's the outlaw!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Got to settle him first. He can't — why he can't be more than eight or ten miles from the food depot on Flaxman Island. A brisk morning's walk, that's all."

After careful deliberation he decided to mount his reindeer and ride directly for the shore of the island. The island would be solidly connected to the shore by the ocean ice. He would search out the depot and ride boldly up to it.

"Surely," he told himself, "no man who plots mischief is going to be afraid of an unarmed boy riding a reindeer. Hope I can catch him unawares and steal a march on him."

Having put his plan into action, his faithful reindeer and he soon went racing away over the tundra. Coming to the shore of the island, in order to reach the north shore where the

food depot was placed he began skirting it.

The ice was everywhere smooth as a floor and covered with just enough snow to give the reindeer good footing.

"Would be a regular lark if it wasn't so dangerous. This marching right up to a man you have followed for thousands of miles is not what it's cracked up to be."

A high cut-bank hid the food depot, a long, low building, from his sight until he was all but upon it.

As he rounded the point of the cut-bank he saw a man, whose back was turned to him, disappear around the northwest corner of the building.

"Did he see me?" he breathed. "I'll play he didn't."

Hastily wheeling his reindeer about, he retreated to the shelter of the cut-bank.

Here after a moment's thought he tied the reindeer to an out-cropping willow root, then, on hands and knees, crept back to the corner.

Peeping around the point, he stood at strained

attention. He saw no one, heard no one. "And yet he might be spying at me," he whispered. "Got to risk it, though."

At that he leaped to his feet and dashed full speed toward the cabin. The distance was two hundred yards. His heart beat madly. Would he be shot down before he reached that shelter?

Now he had covered half the distance, now two-thirds, now three-quarters. That his footsteps might not be heard, he was now running on tiptoes. With his breath coming in short gasps, he leaped to a corner of the cabin, threw himself upon the snow close to the wall and was for the moment safe.

"So much, so good," he breathed. "Now if only he doesn't see me first."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SPARKLE OF DIAMONDS

Just as Joe and Jennings had finished their breakfast of polar bear meat and were preparing to go forward, the broad cake of ice on which they had camped gave a sudden lurch, then rose to such an angle as threatened to pitch them all into a yawning gap of black water.

Joe sprang forward. The dogs howled dismally. Only Jennings kept his head.

"Wonder if that's the beginning of a break-up?" he said, wrinkling his brow. "If it is, every man-buck of that exploring party's lost and we'll be doin' fine if we escape ourselves. It's a tremendous affair when this ice gets to pilin'. Big cakes, wide as a city lot and thick as a one-story house, climb on top of each other like kittens playin' with a yarn ball. What's a man's chance in a mess like that?"

There was, however, no thought of turning back. As long as there was a chance of saving Munson's party their duty lay straight ahead. Only one part of their plans was changed. It was decided that they would pack their dogs as burros are packed on mountain trails and that until the return trip their sled should be abandoned.

It was a strange procession that started out over the roughly piled ice. Jennings, with a bulky sleeping-bag strapped to his back, led the way. He was followed by a long line of dogs. On each dog's back was securely fastened a long strip of meat. Joe brought up the rear with the other sleeping-bag.

Had an airplane passed over them as they moved forward, its pilot might have seen what seemed some huge brown worm wriggling its way in and out among the ice piles.

To their great relief the ocean staged no more demonstrations. The ice remained motionless. All day, guided by a compass, they made their way forward. Far into the night

they traveled. Two hours after midnight they ate and rested, then again pushed forward.

Just as the tardy sun was rising, they heard a shot in the distance and, to their great joy, found themselves a few moments later being cheered lustily by the worn-out and starving explorers.

Soon, over a fire of bear fat, caribou meat was roasting.

When, an hour later, they started back over the trail it was with high hopes of reaching shore in safety. Yet many a mile of treacherous ice lay between them and that coveted goal.

* * * * * * *

The sight which met Curlie Carson's gaze as he finally mustered up courage to creep up to the corner of the food depot building and peer around it, made his blood boil hot with anger.

Before him, crouching over and placing the last contributions to a huge bonfire of excelsior, paper and packing-boxes piled against the building, was the outlaw.

"Guessed right," Curlie told himself, "and

just in time. A moment more and the thing would have been done, the house all aflame. He means to burn it, but he won't."

A second glance showed him the outlaw's sled piled high and his dog team grouped about it.

"All ready to race away," he breathed as he tightened his muscles for a spring.

It was a desperate chance. Three paces from the man a rifle leaned against the cabin. The man was between Curlie and the rifle. There was not a moment to lose.

With a snarl like a tiger Curlie sprang for the other's back. They went crashing to the snow in a heap.

The struggle was brief and terrific. When they broke their hold Curlie was bruised and bleeding but he had gained a point — an all important point. He was now between the man and his rifle.

Quicker than a cat, he sprang for it and the next instant aimed it square at the other's breast.

With a wild cry of terror the man turned and

fled toward the shore where ice was piled in jagged heaps.

Still panting from his recent struggle, Curlie followed him slowly. He was examining the rifle. It was of a new design, totally unknown to him.

"Good thing he didn't know I couldn't fire it," he breathed. "They say what you don't know don't hurt you. Well, that's one time it did."

After a moment's struggle he discovered the rifle's secret. He smiled as he walked out upon the ocean's ice.

"Thinks he can hide from me. Guess he failed to notice that in this still, cold air one's breath rises far above him. He'll have to stop breathing if he wishes to escape."

He walked straight toward a high ice-pile and a moment later had the pleasure of seeing a dark object dart away from it.

"I could shoot him," he told himself. "Deserves it too. Trying to burn those supplies and leave thirty men to freeze and starve! Wonder

why he did it? I'll find out. I'll tire him out, then capture him. After that I'll ask him."

But he never did.

The game of hide-and-go-seek had lasted for two hours, when the man pursued started straight across a broad expanse of ice which was smooth as a floor.

"That looks dangerous — looks like new ice," gasped Curlie as he threw himself flat down upon it.

With his sheath knife he hacked at it until a stream of water came bubbling up and he heard the wild rush of the current that raced on beneath it.

"Not more than half an inch thick!" he breathed to himself.

The next instant he was on his feet, backing off the ice and shouting: "Hey! Hey, there! Danger! Danger! Thin ice! Dan — "

He did not complete the last word, for just at that minute there came a wild shout of despair.

Splitting from end to end, the ice caved in

at the middle. For a moment the man clung to the edge, then the current seized him.

Just before he disappeared his right hand went up and a shower of "sparks," which glimmered and glistened like stars, went shimmering away across the dark water to light upon a broad stretch of ice which had not broken.

"Diamonds!" breathed Curlie. "Diamonds and rubies from Russia! He was the smuggler chief. Wonder why he threw them that way?"

The question had no answer. Yet, there they lay, thousands of dollars worth of jewels.

"Out of a fellow's reach for the present," Curlie told himself, "but I guess if the ice doesn't break up any more for a day or two it will be easy to come out and pick them out of the ice.

"And now," he told himself, "I must get in some quick work in behalf of our friends, the explorers. With a whole reindeer herd at my disposal I ought to be able to do something."

He walked away for a hundred yards, then paused to look back.

"It's tough," he told himself, "tough to be blinked out like that. No question he deserved it, but there's so much bad in the best of us that we can well afford to feel a lot of pity for the worst of us."

With this he turned and hurried away toward the shore.

CHAPTER XXVII

DIAMONDS AND OTHER THINGS

Joe Marion found that five members of the exploring party had had their feet so badly frozen that they were unable to walk. To carry these over the piled and tumbled ice to the spot where the sleds had been cached was no mean task. At the same time there was every possible need for speed. An unfavorable wind at this time would mean certain death to all of them.

They started out bravely and toiled on for many hours, without food. When they did pause, there was only one kind of food left to them — polar bear meat.

"About the worst kind of meat there is in the world," sighed the great explorer as he tried to roast a bit of it over a blubber fire. "The only way you can get any real satisfaction out of it is to chew a piece of it till your jaws are

tired, then swallow it part way down. When your jaws are rested, cough it up and start chewing all over again. When you have repeated this about four times it may go all the way down and stay down."

They all laughed at this plan of procedure, but found on trying the meat that it was indeed the toughest proposition they had ever tackled.

"Like a bit off the neck of an old bull," was Jennings' comment.

When they had rested for a time they again turned their faces shoreward to resume their march against death.

In the meantime, on shore Curlie had made his way back to the reindeer herd. A careful study of the deer convinced him that certain of them were sled deer.

"Got their antlers half cut off; just stubs left," he told himself. "Stands to reason that the Eskimo cut them off so they'd travel lighter in harness."

Making a packing rope into a lasso, he succeeded in catching one of these deer by the stubs

of his antlers. The marks of a harness told him he was right about these sled deer.

"I'll just catch three of them and tie them to old Whitie. Then I'll lead all four out to meet Joe and the explorers. They'll be glad enough to have some fresh reindeer meat. We'll make these three into venison, but not old Whitie! Never! He's been my pal through too many narrow escapes. He's going to live to tell the story."

Some ten hours later, as the exploring party, weakened by lack of proper food, struggled forward over the tumbled ice, they were surprised to see the stubby antlers of a white sled deer appear around an ice pile.

"Reindeer!" someone shouted.

"Reindeer and Curlie Carson!" exclaimed Joe, fairly overcome with joy at meeting his old pal after so long a lapse of time.

Three hours later, having struggled forward to the safe and solid shore-ice, the whole party sat down to a real feast of reindeer steak, while a little distance away, chained to their sled,

Major, the old guard, sent out short woof-woofs in the direction of old Whitie, and Pete, the huskie, who was nine-tenths wolf, sawed at his chain and ki-yied his desire to leap at the reindeer's throat.

When they had finished, and had made such shift as they could for a night's rest before making the remaining twenty-five miles to the food depot on Flaxman Island, Joe and Curlie sat long upon an overturned sled talking.

"So you think it was the smuggler chief?" said Joe as Curlie finished telling of his adventure at the food depot.

"Must have been. Look at the diamonds."

"Think we can get them?"

"Believe so."

"But, say, how about the Whisperer?"

"Didn't see a sign of any such person. Guess she was just a hoax — never existed at all."

"I'm not sure about that. I think she must be a real person."

"Well, when we get back there on Flaxman Island we'll look around."

They arrived at the food depot next day. As soon as the exploring party had been made comfortable, Joe and Curlie set out to solve two problems, the problem of the Whisperer and that of saving the rubies and diamonds.

The question of the Whisperer was soon settled, or at least they believed it was, for, leading away from the island, they found a three days' old sled track. The sled had been drawn by eight powerful dogs. There were no human footprints beside the sled track.

"Saw what happened to the outlaw and skipped," was Joe's comment.

"Yes, and if I had had time to look about I might have stopped her," Curlie lamented.

"Would you have wanted to do that?"

"I don't know."

"She seems to be a pretty good sort; never did us anything but good. Though how she came to be traveling with that rascal is more than I can guess."

"Well, she's gone. How about our diamonds?"

Curlie led the way to the spot of the tragedy. There had been no snow. The spot was not hard to find. As Curlie had expected, the ice had frozen to a depth of six or eight inches.

"But where are the diamonds?" he exclaimed as he failed to catch any gleam from them.

A thorough search revealed not a single stone.

"Perhaps the Whisperer came back and got them," suggested Joe.

"Couldn't. The ice was too thin then."

Suddenly Joe bent over to examine a hole the size of a lead pencil in the ice. Bending over he chipped away at the ice for a second, then, straightening up, gave out a wild shout.

"Whoopee!"

He held in his hand a splendid solitaire.

"Melted its way into the ice," he explained.

A careful search revealed other such holes. After two hours the boys had succeeded in securing twenty-eight stones.

When they felt they had rescued the last one, they turned toward camp.

"We're rich," laughed Joe. "Twenty thou-

sand dollars worth of cut stones and fifty thousand worth of reindeer."

"Rich for a day," Curlie laughed back. "The stones we must turn in to the customs department and the reindeer herd must be restored to its rightful owners. I must get McGregor, the deputy, on the air at once and find out about that."

Three weeks later the two boys were once more on the Valdez Glacier, just one day's journey from the port where they might catch a boat for Seattle and the great "Outside." Their adventures on the Yukon Trail were about at an end.

One question remained unsolved: Who was the Whisperer and where was she? It had been established as a fact that the outlaw was the leader of the band of smugglers. Since he had been deprived of his illegal gains by the loyal action of Munson, the explorer, in breaking up his band, he had planned a cruel revenge — that of destroying his supply station and leaving him with his faithful companions to starve.

Curlie's prompt action had averted the catastrophe, but where was the driver of that powerful dog team that had left the supply cabin, and where now could she be?

Curlie was seated in the tent, nodding over his radiophone instruments and thinking of this problem and many other things. He remembered the gratitude of the Eskimo upon the return of the stolen reindeer herd, thought too of the frank praise of the explorer, Munson, when he had parted with him on the trail to Dawson. The jewels had gone with Munson to Dawson. So all matters were cleared up and Curlie was ready for some new undertaking.

In the corner of the tent Joe Marion was having a last romp with his "faithful four," Ginger, Pete, Major and Bones. To-morrow he would return them to the owner from whom they had been hired in Valdez.

"Do you know," he said, a suspicious huskiness creeping into his voice, "I once heard an old sourdough musher say that of all the things he had in the Arctic, he hated most to part with

his dogs. I laughed at him then, but now I know it's true."

"Yes, sir," answered Curlie. "It's queer, but you —"

He broke off suddenly. His nose began wiggling like that of a rabbit eating clover. He was getting something from the air. That something was a whisper, the whisper of the Whisperer. It said:

"Hello - Curlie - are - you - there? You - didn't - see - me - there - up - at - the - top - of - the - world - on the shore - of - the Arctic - did you? I thought - you - had - better - not.

"But - Curlie - they - want - you - on the - trail - that - leads - over - the - Great - American - Desert. Big - things - Curlie - I heard - them - calling - you. You may - see - me - there - for - that - is - my - home - and I - am - going - back."

The whisper ended. Curlie sat staring into space, thinking: "Is the Whisperer a real person or only a ghostly spirit of the air?"

Almost as if in answer to the question came

a call from the station at Valdez, a relayed message telling him to report for duty on the American Desert at once.

"Whew!" he breathed as he mopped his brow, "I may solve that mystery yet."

How he struggled toward its solution and how he continued to be of service to his country and his fellow men by the aid of his radiophone and his wonderful ears, will be told in the next book, entitled: "The Desert Patrol."